Hivefled

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/582582.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con
Category: Multi
Fandom: Homestuck
Character: Becquerel (Homestuck), The Trolls (Homestuck), The Kids (Homestuck), The Condesce, Grand Highblood, Original Troll Character(s), Gamzee Makara, Karkat Vantas, Kanaya Maryam, Terezi Pyrope, Vriska Serket, Equius Zahhak, Eridan Ampora, John Egbert, Jade Harley, Rose Lalonde, Dave Strider, Tavros Nitram, Tinkerbull, Feferi Peixes, Sollux Captor, Aradia Megido, Nepeta Leijon, The Psiioniiic, Mom (Homestuck)
Series: Part 2 of Hivefled
Stats: Published: 2012-12-04 Updated: 2015-07-07 Chapters: 53/? Words: 213653

Hivefled

by chelonianmobile, Fovos

Summary

A Homestuck AU, in which the game never happened; three trolls were conscripted, then became deserters. Now, all of them are on the run as they try to prepare to take down a twisted regime. While not forgetting they are in the best sweeps of their lives. Followup to "Reprise".
Follow-up to "Reprise": http://archiveofourown.org/works/603049/chapters/1087136
(Warning for torture porn, more extensive tags in the notes.)
Moved over here from http://hivefled.tumblr.com/ and questions can be asked via comments here or the ask box there. We also have a TVTropes page:
http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/Hivefled
Enjoy!
A young man stood in his bedroom; or, rather, in what would officially become his bedroom at the end of that summer. It was a beautiful afternoon, and all was right with John Egbert’s world. He didn’t have much to unpack, given over the summer most of the stuff from his old house would be shipped here. Enough clothes, movies, and books to keep him entertained until the rest of his stuff showed up. If he even had time, for the first time in a long time all his friends were together.

An extremely unmanly scream interrupted his thoughts from the next room. He ran out, and found his friend Dave stomping out of his own room, muttering what sounded like the phrase “fucking puppets”.

“Bro sneak Cal into your luggage again?” John asked, smirking. “I heard the scream.”

“What scream? Nobody was screaming,” Dave said, expressionless as usual.

“Sure, Strider,” he said, a snicker badly masked. The scream that may or may not have happened roused the attention of the two others unpacking in their respective rooms. Both of them poking their head out of their doors to see what the noise was about.

“Was that you, Dave? Or is the prankster’s gambit stronger than ever, John?” Jade asked, a small smile on her face. Either way that scream would have been funny. John let himself smile, looking towards his cousin.

“Well, it wasn’t me, no sudden surprises in my suitcase.”

“Dave, are the puppets following you up from San Antonio?” Jade said a small laugh in her voice, but she was being more graceful about it then John ever was. Dave opened his mouth to respond when he was nearly mowed over by a huge white ball of fluff.

“Bec! Here boy!” The dog perked up and bounced over to Jade, wagging its tail. She let it jump up for a hug. “Who’s a good boy? Good dog! Best friend!”

“I see my mother managed to keep him alive during our school year,” Rose said, eyeing the dog. “It doesn’t seem he is any worse for wear.” Bec confirmed this with a bark and a drooly grin.

“Rose, don’t be so mean! It was really sweet of her to let him stay. I would have hated to leave him all alone for the whole school year and summer.” Jade was scratching behind his ears, while he watched Rose. She spared him a pat on the head.

“Back on the topic of surprises in suitcases, Bro stuck about a million condoms in mine. Again,” Dave sighed. “And a note.” He flourished the offending paper and read it. “‘Use these if you need them, and I do not mean to make balloon animals’. Don’t suppose you want any?”

John wrinkled his nose. “Dude, we’re staying with my cousin and my stepsister. Ew.”

“I bet we’ll go into town at some point. Don’t you want to be prepared? I mean what if you meet someone, what if she’s the one. You go up to some secluded Lover’s Lane and both of you spread out on a blanket and start making out and you’re about to take the next step. Then you remember you didn’t take from you good friend Strider’s extensive condom pile and you can’t go any farther. You stop, and then you never see her again. All chances of happiness and your soulmate gone for all eternity just because you were unprepared.” Dave sighed melodramatically.
“If he doesn’t want any, can I have some?”

“Aw, geez, Jade!” John groaned. “I didn’t need that thought.”

“Hey, be nice to your cousin!” Dave told him, handing over a few of the little foil packages. “She just wants to share her love, ain’t that right, Jade? Guess you’ve gotta ‘cos you’ve got so much you’ll explode in a cloud of candyfloss and rainbows if you don’t let some out.” He winked, insofar as the others could tell whether he was winking behind his sunglasses.

“I would point out that you would understand that better than anyone, Strider, however that would be the pot calling the kettle black.” Rose joined the group in the hallway.

“Yeah, I’ll never understand why you two broke up.” John shook his head.

“Are we all done unpacking? If so, perhaps there is something you would all like to do. Other than congregate in the hallway like a very fleshy fire hazard.”

Dave’s stomach answered the question for him with a quiet gurgle. “How about we go eat something other than airplane peanuts?”

“Do you want to head into town or would you rather make our own food here? Either option is fine by me, though going into town might be better than the meager pickings around the house. Mother or us will have to go shopping. Though I am sure we could produce sandwiches. Which might be far more enjoyable than peanuts.”

“Sandwiches sound fine,” John said, shrugging. “Just not peanut butter, okay? I can’t have it and I think Dave would kill himself if he ever sees peanuts again.”

“I don’t intend to kill either of you… Yet,” Rose said with a small smile. John just shook his head at her. “Let us head down to the kitchen then.”

In the kitchen, Rose scowled at the plate of assorted sandwiches, crusts cut off, already waiting on the kitchen table. “Damn. My mother is a cunning and persistent woman.”

“She makes good sandwiches, too,” said Jade, mouth full of cucumber and bread.

“I’m happy it’s sandwiches, not cake. You’ll have to get used to that, Rose. You’ll come home from school and there will be sandwiches and cake waiting for you. Now there’s two of us it’ll be worse than ever, we’ll end up buried in cake and notes saying ‘I AM SO PROUD OF YOU KIDS’. Speaking of your- I mean our mom, where is she?”

“I would assume she is at work. I just can’t believe we are starting these games so soon after I am home. I would think she’d give me at least one day to get my passive-aggressive ability back. Since I am older, I guess she knows I can handle it. How do I counter this?” Rose said with a sigh. She sat down at the table, taking her own sandwich.

“Breakfast in bed?” Dave suggested. “You could get up at like four AM and make breakfast and wake her up about half an hour early so she’s gotta get up and thank you …”

“Dave, don’t encourage her.”

“Or you could make me breakfast in bed,” Dave added, ignoring Jade. “I promise not to be passive-aggressive about it.”

“No.”
“It was worth a shot - if I make it for you, will you return the favor?”

“I fear what you know how to cook. I was under the assumption you ate nothing but frozen pre-packaged meals. I must say Pizza Rolls for breakfast doesn’t do anything for me.”

“I’m going to get us off of this topic. What do you guys want to do, we still have plenty of sunlight to do whatever.” John said. “Though I gotta admit, I’m a little tired from the flight.”

“Maybe we should just hang out around here then? Watch a movie, TV, or something else. Plan for something bigger later. If y’all don’t mind.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Jade said. “Then we’ll have a full day if we want to go hiking or whatever. I’d love to go hiking, the scenery’s great around here.”

“Sounds fun- wait.” John looked at Bec, whose ears were perked up curiously. “Can you guys hear something? Sort of a whining, whistling sound outside? I think it’s getting louder.”

Bec jumped up from where he was laying on the floor, barking at the back door. The four friends hurried outside and looked around, unable to pinpoint the noise until Rose pointed to the sky and cried “There! Look!”

A streak of light was tearing across the blue sky, heading towards the earth. From the sound, it was going to land not very far away.

“What the fuck is that?” Dave asked no one in particular.

“Space junk? Maybe a satellite fell out of orbit?” Jade added, squinting at it. “Looks bigger than a satellite though.”

“Is it a plane?” John sounded nervous. “Because it looks like it’s heading right towards us.”

“No, I think we’re safe,” Rose said, blinking from staring at the bright light. “Looks like it’s going to land somewhere on the other side of the hill. It just looks close because it’s big … definitely looks too big to be a satellite.”

“I don’t know what it could be, and I’m usually pretty space savvy. It doesn’t look like any type of thing I’ve ever seen before.” Jade lifted a hand, resting it over her eyes, trying to get a better look at the thing. “It would be landing in the woods that’s for sure. Judging by the trajectory. Though, it doesn’t look like it’s slowing down much.”

“Geez, if it is a spacecraft I hope there’s nobody in it,” John said. “No way is it going to be able to land safely here-”

The mysterious object disappeared over the crest of the hill. Moments later, a loud BOOM shook the house, the shockwave nearly knocking the group off their feet. Bec barked almost loudly enough to drown out the sound of the collision, and everyone was too busy trying to stay on their feet to react until it died down. When all was silent again, the four looked at each other.

“Or we could go hiking right now?” Dave suggested.

“Would you mind, John?”

“Not at all!” John said, rocking back and forth on his heels and grinning excitedly. “I want to know what that was, what happens if it was like a meteor or something? We would get to discover it!”
Bec picked up the excitement from the humans and barked again, happily this time.

“So we’re in agreement,” Rose said with a nod. “To adventure.”

The four moved into the house, each getting appropriate footwear, backpacks, and water bottles, and Rose left a brief note to her mother. Meeting up back outside facing towards the hill, they set off, Bec following close beside Jade. It wasn’t a long walk to one of the trails leading into the woods.

“We stay on the trail, and look for any broken trees or signs of impact.” Rose said. “I don’t really feel like needing a search and rescue team my first day back.”

“This goes over the hill right?”

“If you travel on it long enough it will. Just keep a lookout for any signs of something that big crash landing.”

“Can’t exactly be easy to miss, right?” Dave said with a shrug.

As it turned out, it was. Two hours passed, and not a sign could be found. The group took a break, sitting on a fallen tree and taking out their water bottles. Jade let Bec drink from hers when she was done with it, earning a disgusted look from John.

“Ew, are you sure you should be sharing a water bottle with your dog?”

“Geez, it’s not like I’m putting it in his mouth,” Jade said, pouring the water close enough to Bec’s snout for him to catch it with his tongue. “Poor dog’s thirsty!”

“Hm. Your dog aside, I thought for sure we would have found our mystery object by now,” Rose mused. “I suppose it must be further away than I assumed.”

Jade’s eyes were wide behind her glasses. “That must mean it was really big. I guess it probably landed well away from the path … maybe we should split up?”

“I don’t think wandering off the trail is a good idea. I doubt there’s anything dangerous in the woods, but it’s easy to get lost.”

“Aw, c’mon, we won’t go far,” Dave protested. “We’ve got our phones, right, not like any of us would be caught dead without ‘em? Any of us get into trouble we can call each other, or call for help - there a forest equivalent of the coastguard?”

Rose frowned. “Well, I suppose it can’t really do much harm. As long as we meet back up before dark …”
Breaking News at 3:44
The deserter Princess Feferi Peixes has founded a terrorist organization. They are an obvious threat to the peace of the Empire, threatening to allow the Vast Glub to be sung. More information to be released as it comes.

Update at 5:16
A few prominent younger trolls have either been abducted or defected to the rebellion. They boarded the SAIGE-40 at approximately 13:12. They managed to slaughter 5 trolls while they slept before the alarm went off. As they tried to flee, the subjugglator division managed to take 15 of the rebels. The only one captured alive quickly swallowed some type of poison.

Update at 5:55
The Panashkar of SAIGE-40 released a statement: “Upon reviewing the footage of the attack, it seems as if they had help from the inside; two trolls have been arrested and taken in for further questioning. From what we can tell there were three targets of the attack: the Empress, who is on SAIGE-40 reviewing fleet plans; her Head Peacekeeper; and his protege.

When the alarm sounded, the High General set to make sure the Empress was safe from any threat. His ward set off to stem the threat. He took down two of the trolls attempting to get to the Empress, and he was working towards finding where they had hidden. Right now he is missing.”

Update at 7:05
The Condescension has made a statement to the whole of the Empire:

“I hope all of you will forgive me for my absence in not making a statement; however, this attack has shaken me to my core. We, as an Empire, have always strived to keep every troll safe. I know that isn’t always possible. This attack has only reaffirmed the point my General and I have been speaking about since my arrival here.

This attack has hit very close to my heart. This involves discussion of something I have avoided for sweeps for various reasons. This situation warrants me to allow you all to have a private look into my life. The General and myself are moirails. He is presently very distraught, as his protege has been taken. But that young troll was not simply a ward or in training under the general. He was also his progeny. We suspect and fear for the worst. I ask if any troll notices anything suspicious of your blockmate, or anything strange occurring on your ship, to report it immediately.

They will be attempting to take trolls’ lives to frighten us. To weaken us. We did receive one message from them, asking me to abdicate my throne via suicide. This type of cowardice should sum up the motivations of this group. If my cabinet wishes to assist in my death, they can keep their positions; if not, they will be executed as well.

This fight will not be simple, as it appears they have sympathizers all over the empire. Promising power to those that assist, and slavery or death to all those who oppose and even those who remain neutral. I will be the first to say that the Empire has problems; however, asking a troll to kill themselves because you are too weak to do so yourself is not what we need for progress in our hold on the reaches of space.

I understand that the idea of revolution might seem romantic. I would ask you to keep in mind that
they are ready and willing to drag innocent trolls to their deaths while they sleep. They are willing to
enslave any troll who questions their methods, they are ready to ruin our hold on our universe with
weak and feeble ideas, inviting even more pain and suffering from stronger opponents out in the
galaxy.

I fear for every troll out there. Their reach doesn’t matter to caste, they will strike down or torture
any troll who opposes them. I ask that any troll with information about this group step forward so
there need not be any more needless deaths based on the Princess’s timid nature. I will be opening
my wealth, my assets, and privilege to every Captain of the ships, and any valid information brought
forward will be rewarded handsomely. Together we will stand for true ideals, for our superiority
over our domain, and we will not be knocked down because one girl didn’t want to face me in open
combat. Thank you all.”

**Update at 12:35**

Another attack happened last night on the Caltorinii Colony, in an attempt to reduce the flow of
supplies. No contact can be made with the land, and security photographs do not bode well. At this
time there is not a lot of information available, as updates arrive we will keep you posted.

**Update at 3:57**

A recon team was sent to Caltorinii and the amount of devastation is bound to reverberate through
the empire. The lives of hundreds of colonists and amberblooded trolls have been lost. The Caltorinii
colony is the main supplier of foodstuffs, and all the stores have been destroyed or poisoned. The
livestock was slaughtered and the meat destroyed. There is not yet an official count for the deaths,
though the amount of destruction of supplies might bring a food shortage to the Empire.

---

A/N: SAIGE-40 is the technical name for the Subjugglator ship. (The name of it is “Tarlou-Na”,
which is in the sacred language of the Subjugglators and not Alternian.)

Panashkar (pn.) press secretary pl. Panashkarij

The actual planet is Caltoran, however “-(r)inii” was added by the Alternian empire to show it was
a colony under them. “-(r)inii” is a diminutive, usually used in making pet names or cutie-grub
names of trolls.
Chapter 3

Chapter by chelonianmobile

Gamzee didn’t exactly know the way out of the caves, but now that the awkward conversation was over, he was going to leave. He knew both Karkat and Kanaya were stalking behind him, trying to stop him. He didn’t tell them any more than he had to. Told them that the Empire was aware of their movements and where they were. That they did have a squad to take care of it covertly, and no one else would know they were ever there.

He was done, he could hide away and not have to be cooped up in a cave system. He didn’t have to endanger any of their lives again. He would just vanish, which was starting to be a task. With or without the mask or paying attention to when he walked back in, every tunnel looked the same and he couldn’t seem to get his brain to focus long enough to recite directions backwards.

He knew he was ahead of his two friends, he knew the longer he stayed there the more risky it would be. He dodged into another tunnel, and this was he was sure he didn’t recognize. He took a moment in the darkness of the tunnel to readjust his hood and try to get his wits about himself.

It wouldn’t take long to vanish on the surface, he just had to get there. He took a breath and strained his ears, trying to find where Karkat or Kanaya were, as well as listen for anyone else. Not hearing anyone too close, he left the strange hallway and kept working his way down hallways and different paths to hopefully find his way up to the exit. He could find somewhere relatively close to stay if the sun was still out, wait until it set, and he’d be on his way.

His stomach fluttered and clenched, and despite all the sleeping he had done back in the room he had been kept locked up in on his first arrival, he was exhausted. He could feel himself wanting to yawn, and just curl up and actually sleep. But him being there was a danger to everyone, if he could just vanish things would be better. Then he could rest and find himself something to eat.

The sound of humming alerted him to another troll’s approach. He knew that voice, if only from occasional webcam chats. He glanced around frantically for somewhere to hide, but before he could, Vriska Serket had turned the corner and noticed him. She squinted, trying to make out his face in the shadow under his hood. He tugged it further down, hoping fervently that she wouldn’t recognise him.

She shifted slightly, arm at the ready to pull out a weapon. “Are you a friend or did you just stumble into my lair?” It was unlike the Vriska he knew to ask questions first, but he should have known an unknown troll in these caves would be suspicious.

He sighed and debated with himself internally. He could reveal his identity, he could attempt to fight her, or he could try to run off. He had a head start with Karkat and Kanaya, but this was a little close. Fighting her would risk hurting her, and he didn’t want to leave any of his friends in pain as he left.

“Friend.” His voice was soft. Vriska shifted, she was thinking. He probably sounded different. He cleared his throat. “Don’t worry, spider sister. I ain’t here to do anything ill.” She recognized him then.

“‘Spider sis-’… Gamzee Makara!” She cackled loudly. “Well, the gang’s all here now!” She strode forward and for a moment he thought she was going to hug him, but instead she grabbed his arm and pumped it in a violent handshake - exactly eight pumps, of course. “How long has it been? Wow.”
He lamely returned the handshake, wanting to get her hands off him. As soon as her hand seemed to lessen its hold he tried to pull his arm away. She had something between a smile and a grimace on her face, holding his arm in place. He thought over her question. He didn’t honestly know. “Three months, since I got on the ships… I guess.”

She moved forward again, grabbing his wrist this time instead of his hand. “Come on, I didn’t know they had actually recovered you, I’m sure everyone will want to see you. I’ll come along so you don’t meet a sticky end from someone who wouldn’t be as collected as I am in the face of danger.” She pulled him forward.

“No, it’s all good, sis, I kinda just want to sleep. I’ll see everyone tonight.”

Her thumb rubbed lightly over his wristbones, and she frowned. “Well, you should at least come and get some food. I can feel you’re way too skinny, it’d be a pain in the ass if you starved to death so soon after we found you.” He must have flinched, because she cackled again. “Geez, can’t you take a joke? Huh, for a clown you really have no sense of humour. So laaaaaaaame!”

“I ain’t gonna starve over one day. So how about you let me go and we can see each other in the dusk? I’ll be more up for socializing then.” His stomach churned at the thought of real food. Not the collection of things he had been fed that were masquerading as food. “Anyway it’s late, pro’lly everyone will be sleeping.”

“Don’t be silly!” She pulled him forward again. “We stay up to all hours of the day now. Anyway, you’re nowhere near where you should be holing up to sleep. A little close to the surface here. You wouldn’t want something to come in and snatch you up while you slept.” The words plus the thought sent a shiver of fear through him. Her lips turned more into a smile with that. “Let me at least show you where you’re sleeping, and on the way we can get you a snack or something.”

The sound of running feet and a shout of “Gamzee!” announced the arrival of Karkat and Kanaya. They scurried up beside him, Karkat panting slightly from running. “Thanks for finding him, Vriska, I was wondering if he’d vanished into thin air. Sheesh, I can’t fucking take my eyes off you for a moment, you pan-added clown …”

“Hello, fearless leader,” said Vriska, throwing an ironic salute in Karkat’s direction. “I was about to take him to get fed, you want to come with us?”

“That would be good.” Vriska’s eyes narrowed slightly at Karkat. “Do you want help getting him down there? He’s a little out of it still.” Vriska’s eyebrow arched.

“Why are you being polite all of a sudden?”

“Vriska, just do it, just help us take him down to get something to eat.” Karkat might have been frustrated and angry, but he was trying to stay calm. Apparently he was overdoing the acting. Gamzee tried to pull his hand from Vriska; instead her hand just clutched down tighter, pulling him down the hallway, and to a little offshoot. Vriska in front of him and Karkat and Kanaya behind him. He wanted to growl, but that wouldn’t help him to escape and just might inform everyone something was wrong.

Kanaya pulled herself up beside him. “Gamzee.” She patted his shoulder and he fought every urge to roll it to push the touch away. “It’ll be alright.” He turned his head to the side, well aware she couldn’t see his expression. But he was sure if she could have she might have been lit on fire. At least the growl was still contained.

Soon enough they found the dining room; a large cavern full of long tables. Few trolls were there at
this time of day, but a familiar figure was seated nearby; Terezi Pyrope. She turned at the sound of new arrivals, and sniffed. “Karkles!” She jumped up to greet him, and he grudgingly let her hug him. “How’s it going? … Who’s the long streak of licorice?” she asked, gesturing towards Gamzee’s black cloak. He shrank away from her as much as he could without being conspicuous.

“Turns out my… followers aren’t completely incompetent and managed to recover Gamzee. We’re just feeding him and then getting him a place to sleep. Speaking of sleep, you should get to it too. We have a lot to discuss now that everyone is here.” Karkat moved back to give her the room to head towards the door.

Terezi cackled loudly. “Heyyy, Mister Grape Faygo is back! …” She sniffed. “That’s … that’s a lot of grape Faygo …” Her face fell abruptly. “Fuck. Fuck, Gamzee, are you bleeding?” She sniffed again, blinking her blind eyes and directing her face upwards slightly, towards his horns. Karkat gestured frantically at her to shut up, but of course she couldn’t see him and her famous smellovision was taken up with Gamzee. “And I’m getting a little less in the way of candy corn than usual … and is that mulberry? Smells like you’ve got some pretty bad bruises.”


Vriska was eyeing him and taking in his broken horn, the most obvious addition to his collection. She stalked forward a little bit, trying to see under the hood. “Come here, Gamzee,” she said, trying to sound welcoming. “Tell me how your horn got broken.”

“Actually, Vriska, I think I’m just going to take him to get some sleep,” Karkat butted in, standing between her and Gamzee. “You both should head out, go get some sleep.”

“But,” Terezi said, “I’m not tired yet. The sun just set, you’re acting like we have recoontimes.”

“We aren’t wrigglers anymore, Karrrrrrrat.” Vriska was still eyeing Gamzee. No doubt Karkat’s actions made this whole situation seem more suspicious. Gamzee looked over to the door, Kanaya still standing over by it. He didn’t have the energy to put up with this, he just wanted to be alone, then sleep, and then eat.

He tried to leave, but Vriska’s hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. “C’mon, if you’ve got new scars I wanna see! I always miss out on the cool fights, I want a play-by-play! How much worse off did the other guy end up?”

“I-I-” Gamzee stammered and tried to pull his hand away. Karkat grabbed his other arm and tried to pull him in the other direction.

“Vriska, let go of him so I can show him where to sleep. He’s had head injuries, he’ll be even dopier than usual!”

Gamzee would have protested, but he and Karkat were both engaged in a tug-of-war against Vriska, the rope being Gamzee’s arm. At least it wasn’t the scarred one; the sleeve was sliding up, and had it been the other one some extremely difficult questions would have been asked. The growl finally bubbled up out of Gamzee’s throat, rising in volume into a snarl. Vriska, in her surprise, let go of his arm.

Gamzee’s momentum threw him backwards and, as he caught his balance, his hood slid back. The cloak was old and tattered, and Kanaya hadn’t yet had a chance to repair the broken horn-straps on the hood, so it slid all the way off his face.

The room was silent. Karkat and Kanaya had known what to expect, of course, but Vriska gaped
and stared, and Terezi sniffed again, gasped, and reached out. Before her fingers touched the staples, Gamzee covered his face with his arm and turned to run.

Feferi Peixes was standing in the doorway.

Gamzee skidded to a halt just before running into her. Somewhere his mind linked two things. He knew it was Feferi, she was too short, but he could see her. He could tell how much of the Empress was in Feferi. His breathing echoed in his chest; grasping on tighter to his face, he slowly took a step back, unable to shake the image from his mind. As far as his mind was concerned he was back in the torture room. Escaping had been a cruel trick his mind played on him while he slept.

Feferi’s eyes met his and he felt himself shudder, his bloodpusher followed along before increasing its rhythm. He knew he was backing up, and he couldn’t stop his feet. She raised an eyebrow, confusion quickly fleeting along her features. Before she smiled.

He froze. His whole body went rigid. He looked at her smile, the way it lined up on her face, how it exposed her teeth, even how her eye curved with the look. His breath came out chopped and forced. She went to move forward, and he could feel his stomach plummet to the floor. He’d abandon it there. Both of them, his Keeper and the Hag, merged into one troll and it was standing in front of him. She took a step and his eyes widened, there was a noise behind him, someone was talking. Someone was acknowledging it - her, he tried to remind himself. It didn’t work and with another step his body reacted on impulse and he dropped his arm and ran. Almost running into her, but dodging at the last second; hopefully she wouldn’t try to grab him. He took off down the hallways, attempting to disappear in the tunnels before she even realized he had fled.

Feferi was left in a half-step, her smile gone and in shock and confusion she watched the spot where her friend once stood. She looked at the other members of the room, who looked equally confused.

“What the fuck just happened?” Vriska said suddenly.

Kanaya looked towards her, and shrugged, slightly. “Gamzee seems very unwilling to talk about it. Karkat and I inquired when we saw the staples in his face, but he exited before giving us an answer. Then you found him, and it seems as if he will continue to run off if it’s brought up.”

“I just smiled at him and he looked like I told him I was going to cut off his head,” Feferi said, somewhere between sobbing and yelling, her voice cracking. “What did I do? Did I make him angry? Wait… Staples in his face? His hand was covering most of it and when it finally moved I didn’t have a chance to see him, really.”

Terezi stood up from where she had fallen on the floor after Gamzee had pushed her away. “They go up his cheeks like he’s smiling,” she said slowly, her fingers tracing her over the corner of her lips and up her cheeks. “I could smell the shine.” Feferi gasped. “Did he say anything at all to you, Kanaya?”

“Only that the Empire at large was aware of our presence here, and there is a special military branch for elimination missions such as getting rid of us in silence. He informed us we should move, either on the planet or preferably off it. Then he said he was leaving. He was out the door before we had an opportunity to question him or ask what had happened. Though upon his entry it was our first question.”

“He rambled something about being locked up and how we’re all going to die when I spoke to him. Fuck, I thought he just finally sank into sopor hallucinations…” Karkat paced frantically, trying to think. “Okay. Clearly he’s in need of medical attention, but I don’t know how we can keep him still long enough to accept it. Tavros is going to want to know he’s back, but I don’t think Gamzee will
want to see him, and that’s not a conversation I’m looking forward to. Okay.” He stopped and lightly chewed his finger in thought, careful not to draw blood. “Wait, Equius and Eridan said something about having talked to him a while back. Maybe they can help.”
“Yes, we did indeed receive a Trollian communication from the highblood. Must have been … two months ago now? Well, he seemed emotional, and asked for advice about his dealings with his mentor. I and the seadweller both offered help. Honestly, he seemed confused.”

“Yeah, I wwas confused too. He seemed pissed when I didn’t respond right off. Get this, his mentor’s his own fuckin’ bloodlink. Guess the fucker just wwanted to brag.”

“He did express distress at excessive roughhousing, but then Gamzee is quite small for his blood colour - possibly his mentor simply didn’t realise how strong he was.”

“Can you beliewe the nerwe of that guy? His owwn bloodlink’s teachin’ him and then also wwants to fill a pail wwith him, and he complains about it?”

“No need to be so crude, seadweller. But, uh, yes, that was the gist of it. We told him there was no need to be alarmed. I was quite surprised at Gamzee of all people earning such an honour. I suppose he has had time to overcome his more distressing traits, but still, catching the eye of such a respected troll so soon… I do hope everything worked out well for him.”

Silence.

“Wwhy are you lookin’ at us like that, Kar?”

“Because I’m hoping that my overflowing rage will ignite your ridiculous levels of stupidity and kill you in a merciful fiery explosion before Gamzee hears about what you just said.”

“So the highblood was recovered?”

“You could say that,” Karkat mumbled, thinking over everything that had been said. Gamzee’s disconnected rambling in the holding cell, his insistence to see outside, the way he reacted to being touched. Everything made a lot more sense with that bit of information. “Both of you are the stupidest trolls I have the misfortune of calling friends.”

“Wwhat are you goin on about, Kar? Wwhy are wwe the stupidest trolls you’we come into contact with?”

“I know there is a competition going on for that title, but you’ve won the douchebag pageant with thinkpan-numbing skill. Maybe I’m wrong, but what exactly did Gamzee say to you? It will hopefully reduce the points you’ve taken on and I can rescind my statements.”

“Well, Gamzee contacted Eridan first, and then myself. He expressed that his conscription had gone well. He ended up getting a placement with a private mentor, who happened to be his bloodlink. He had an affinity for being a little closer than normal, but Gamzee said that most of the time it went well, despite some horseplay that occasionally hurt. I’ve already expressed that it was probably a misjudgement of strength.”

“It wwas pretty obwious what his mentor wwanted, so wwe told him to just carry on. Needed his friends to tell him it’s okay to have those kinds of feelin’s.” Eridan grinned. “And he didn’t get back to us after that, so we’we figured it must be goin’ good. Ha, lucky little shit, all my mentor did was tell me to get more sleep.”
Karkat was staring at them again, his assumptions becoming a sick and real option that was looking more and more like the truth. If his connection was right he didn’t know what Gamzee would do, or what he himself would do.

“Kar, you’re being really quiet again.”

Karkat took a deep breath. “Did he actually, at any point, use the words ‘I want to pail my ancestor’? Or, for that matter, ‘my ancestor wants to pail me’?”

“Well, no, but it was pretty obvious.”

“If he didn’t want to, I’m sure he would have said so. He probably just got nervous. Gamzee might have some processing problems from his sopor habit, but he couldn’t have missed all the signs.”

Karkat stared both of them down. Their other friends started to join in on staring at them in exasperation.

“Right, he couldn’t have missed it…” Eridan said slowly, starting to fidget where he was standing. “Oh cod, he could have, couldn’t he?”

Beside him Equius shifted and the group could hear the faintest swallow. “Oh, no.”

“You said he sounded emotional. What kind of emotional?” Karkat managed to keep his voice steady. Maybe he was wrong - Gamzee had clearly been hurt, but he clung onto some faint hope that it hadn’t been that particular type of harm. The visible wounds were bad enough.

“I couldn’t really tell. I was feelin’ pretty bad myself that day and I wasn’t really paying attention, and you know his typing’s hard to follow anyway. I figured he was bragging. I made some comment to Equ about how we should have told him what to do but I was sort of joking, I didn’t think he was really that dumb.”

“I thought he seemed nervous, but that would be perfectly normal in an unfamiliar situation.”

“Was he definitely, undeniably bragging? This is Gamzee, he may not be able to string a sentence together but he can at least make it clear when he’s happy or not. He messages us all when he successfully uses the fucking toaster. If he was pailing someone he liked we’d never hear the end of it.”

“No, he didn’t say that exactly. However, his bloodlink’s actions were obvious flirting. Gamzee seemed… in the middle of debate as to whether or not it was something he wanted to pursue. Which can also be explained easily - it is a new experience for him, as far as I know. As well as the fact that most flirting does go right over his head.” Equius cleared his throat. The group was silent, and he felt pressure to continue to explain.

“He said somethin’ about that day going wrong. But it’s like Equius said, his bloodlink could have misjudged his strength.” Eridan shuffled from foot to foot, obviously recounting the conversation in his mind. “I mean, come on, the guy was havin’ Gam sit on his lap, how else could he interpret that?”

“The seadweller even came out right and asked if his bloodlink had made any obvious… gestures.”

“I did,” Eridan said, as if suddenly remembering it. “I went right out with it and asked if his bloodlink had touched him.”

“What did Gamzee answer with?” Karkat asked slowly. He was getting a good idea how this
conversation had gone, and his blood was starting to boil.

“The highblood mentioned that he had touched him. But he was training him to fight so it would have happened anyway.” Equius’ response slowed over time.

Karkat managed a grim smile. “Then after he talked to you about whether or not he should pail his bloodlink, he didn’t message you to say it went well and brag more?” Both Eridan and Equius were looking in his direction, but not really looking at him. Karkat shook his head. “Well?”

“No, he didn’t, but wwe assumed…”

“In my particular circumstance, I didn’t often have the time to message anyone. We just guessed that it went well. If something bad had happened he would have contacted us, correct?”

Karkat shook his head again, laughing a little. It wasn’t funny, but this was ridiculous. Both Equius and Eridan were starting to realize that they obviously didn’t know their friend all that well. “Yes, because if he contacted you because he was debating on whether or not to pail his bloodlink, he would only contact you if something went wrong. He wouldn’t brag like Gamzee has with every minor or trivial success he has ever had. His message to Sollux was a little braggy, but no one was there to let him carry on.” Karkat sighed, his hands curling in frustration.

“But we would have said somefin if somefin bad happened, right?”

“Yeah, I guess he would have, if, you know, his bloodlink made it possible. We tried messaging him for weeks and never got a response. Not even a delayed one. The two of you were the last trolls to talk to him. The last ones. He contacted Sollux, then both of you almost a month later. Then he vanished. We thought he was dead, don’t you remember? I had to hold out on hope that sending trolls to recover him would turn up with something more than a corpse. What I got wasn’t much better, but at least he’s usually breathing.” Karkat threw his hands up in the air. “Seriously, both of you. I think I need to merge you both with a lusus to have two working brain cells between you. If it went right we all would have been bragged to. We would have had very awkward, detailed, and uncomfortable messages from him. If something bad happened do you think he’d bring it up? Actually, he never spoke again. Not until tonight, when he was ranting at me about how it was his fault I was here. How he’d… Fuck. Fuck, fuck all.”

Eridan was gnawing nervously at his lip. Equius’ eyes were wide behind his glasses, and his lips moved, mouthing the word “damn”; even now he was hesitant to swear aloud.

“What, exactly,” Karkat growled. “did you tell him to do?” He tried to rein in his anger. He was going to have to be the damage control and fix this, as always, and he couldn’t be swan-diving off the handle at this.

“Equ… Oh glub… Equ, wwhat if he didn’t realize it? What if he didn’t- he wasn’t- Oh glub.”

“Cease glubbing at me at once, it does nothing to improve this situation and it’s more annoying than anything.”

“I repeat,” Karkat said, his voice measured. “What did you tell him to do? Seriously, would either of you have wanted to pail your mentor- actually, I don’t even have to ask that question. Never mind, forget those words even tried to vomit themselves out of my chirpbox. You would have. You wouldn’t even have batted an eye at the thought. You would have rejoiced that your mentor noticed either of you like that. My fault, I forgot I wasn’t talking to a normal troll here.” Eridan flinched at his words and Karkat couldn’t find it in him to care too much about it.
“Uh, wwe told him… to… just get on wwith it and do wwhat his mentor told him.” Eridan shuffled closer to Equius. “Wwe’re going to die, aren’t wwe?”

“I knew seadwellers were cowards but this is a new low,” Equius murmured under his breath.

Eridan looked over at the taller blueblooded troll and gritted his teeth into a snarl. “At least I wwon’t enjoy it,” he hissed. Equius drew himself up, moving to face the seadweller.

“Both of you stop it or so fucking help me I’ll drag you outside and you can watch the nature that happens during the day,” Karkat growled. “Both of you got yourself into this situation, I just needed the information, and honestly I don’t know what Gamzee is going to do. I bet he’s going to be pissed off, but who knows. He’s more unpredictable than usual. The last thing my aching thinkpan needs right now is both of you taking the moronic fight even further by getting into a fight between yourselves. Though it would make my life substantially easier if both of you were to spontaneously just disappear. God, I hate the pair of you. Hands full of bulges and heads full of empty. For the record, if someone contacts you freaked out about closeness, that’s not usually a normal reaction if they want to pail someone.” Eridan rolled his eyes and Karkat growled at him, his fists balling up at his sides.

“Wwhy wwouldn’t he wwant it, though? Howw wwere wwe supposed to know he didn’t?”

“Indeed, someone of such prestige being interested in you is quite an honor,” Equius chimed in quickly, and fell silent again at the look on Karkat’s face.
Chapter 5

Chapter by chelonianmobile

The hallway looked pretty abandoned, and it was dark enough that he could curl up on the floor. He’d sleep, and when he woke up he’d head out. There was no point in heading out to the sun, there wasn’t any cover close enough that he could avoid the sunlight.

He leaned against the wall, pulling his knees up to his chest, holding them close. He sighed, trying to let himself relax and make himself fall asleep, his pulse still pounding, nervous he’d be found. Nervous he’d have to see them all again. He really didn’t want to deal with all these bloodpusher seizures again.

He closed his eyes, leaning his head on his knees; the sooner he fell asleep the sooner he’d wake up and could vanish. He willed himself to relax long enough to sleep. Something pressed into his hip, and he tensed, sitting up. It pressed again, in some type of rhythmic motion. He almost yanked himself away, looking down at his side. Squinting, he could make out wings, horns, and the rest of a tiny body. A lusus was nuzzling his side. He moved his hand to the side and touched it softly.

The sound of metal hitting the floor reached Gamzee’s ears, and he wondered what it was. Someone wearing steel-toed boots? And what was that other noise - someone shaking a large sheet of paper or something? A voice came after it, and he nearly jumped out of his skin in joy and horror.

“Tinkerbull!”

The lusus at his side lifted its head towards the noise. He was tempted to get up and find another place to hide. A want clinging in his stomach kept him rooted in the spot. The lusus, Tinkerbull, shifted up to its feet and made a noise, calling its charge over.

“Was that you, Tinkerbull?” the voice said, and another noise was made. “Don’t fly off like that!” The voice was echoing down the hallway closer to him. The figure rounded the corner further down and then with a click, rattle, and buzzing hum, the lights turned on in the hallway.

Gamzee sat there frozen, looking down the hallway at the figure. Who stood upright, face still round and sweet, but so different. He stayed frozen, looking at Tavros. He looked so different now. Older, more mature, but with childish innocence still in his eyes. He was standing, walking, each step clanging on the ground, and Gamzee understood that he had robotic legs now.

Better even than the legs, Gamzee noticed a caramel-coloured glitter behind Tavros. It took a second to register what it was, and when it did, his eyes widened. Wings. Tavros had always wanted to fly, and it looked like his perennial shitty luck had taken a break during his final pupation. Even if said shitty luck had come to stay with Gamzee, he felt a rush of joy on his friend’s behalf. Tavros, dear sweet pitiable Tavros, deserved every scrap of good fortune that came his way. Tinkerbull nuzzled into his hip again, and he scratched the creature’s back automatically.

Tavros stiffened, pulling a lance out, holding it at the ready, aimed at the figure sitting on the floor, whose fingers were lazily scratching at his lusus’ back. He didn’t know any purplebloods that would be there, unless it was Gamzee, but that wasn’t his sign.

“Gamzee?” he said softly. His wings fluttered hopefully. If it wasn’t, he’d have to get rid of the infiltrator.

Gamzee said nothing, just looking over the brownblooded boy. Looking at the wings, a small smile
crossing his features. He took a breath and nodded, not wanting to talk, because even if his voice wasn’t slurred he’d rather just let Tavros remember him as he used to be. The smile faded as Tavros approached, his lance once again stored. Gamzee wanted to leave before he got too close, not let him see him or talk to him. Leaving Karkat was hard enough as it was, let alone leaving Tavros, who looked at him, glowing, healthy, and happy.

Tavros’ eyes went to the purpleblood’s horns. One was broken, but he’d seen their shape before. His eyes lit up and he tried to run forwards, stumbling slightly on his new legs.

“Gamzee, is it really you?”

Gamzee threw his arm up over his own face, hoping he’d concealed his scars in time. Tinkerbull squeaked happily and nuzzled him again, and he irritably pushed the little creature away. He glanced back at Tavros, and felt sick at the contrast. Here was Tavros, happy, healthy, walking - walking, on shiny new mechanical legs - and, of all things, winged. And then here was Gamzee, half-starved, scarred, still stinking of the cell under the smell of river water, wearing a dead troll’s clothes - a woman’s clothes, to boot. He wanted to laugh; his ancestor must have been amused by that when they’d found the bodies. His little girl was dressing for her part. Not like he’d had much choice since his male opponent’s clothes had been ruined with blood, but it still hurt to think about it.

“Gamzee?” Tavros stopped just before running into him. It took him a moment, but he crouched down. “What’s wrong? Were the Sufferists, um, mean to you? I’m sorry, some of them don’t like, uhh, highbloods very much.” Gamzee shook his head, still unwilling to talk. He just kept his face covered. “What’s wrong? You know you, uhh, can tell me.”

Gamzee swallowed hard, trying to figure out how he would get out of this mess. He seemed to find nothing but trouble today. Tavros’ fingers wrapped around his forearm, and he felt the once broken bone grind just slightly. That coupled with the touch made his stomach roll.

“Please,” he finally said. He could almost feel Tavros brighten. “Don’t touch me.”

Tavros drew back. “Uhh, okay. Um … is it the wings? I mean, yeah, they do look kind of funny. Kind of an obvious mutation. That’s sort of why I’m here, apart from, uhh, the legs. But that never bothered you, so why …?”

“No, no, it ain’t you, I swear.”

“No, no, it ain’t you, I swear.”

“Gamzee, I, uhh, can’t hear you very well with your hand over your mouth.”

Gamzee sighed, unable to contain it any longer. He dropped his head and pulled his hand back. “It isn’t you or how you look.” His voice was clearer now, but he swore Tavros would connect his slur with his injuries. “I’m glad you up and be getting legs and wings. They look good on you. But that never bothered you, so why …?”

“Please,” he finally said. He could almost feel Tavros brighten. “Don’t touch me.”

Tavros drew back. “Uhh, okay. Um … is it the wings? I mean, yeah, they do look kind of funny. Kind of an obvious mutation. That’s sort of why I’m here, apart from, uhh, the legs. But that never bothered you, so why …?”

“No, no, it ain’t you, I swear.”

“Gamzee, I, uhh, can’t hear you very well with your hand over your mouth.”

Gamzee sighed, unable to contain it any longer. He dropped his head and pulled his hand back. “It isn’t you or how you look.” His voice was clearer now, but he swore Tavros would connect his slur with his injuries. “I’m glad you up and be getting legs and wings. They look good on you. I just don’t want to be touched, okay?” He inched back against the wall. If he stood up and moved fast enough he could find another hallway that was hopefully abandoned and get some sleep. Tavros must have noticed the motion, because his hand twitched towards Gamzee.

“What’s wrong? Are you, uh, sick or something?”

Gamzee did laugh at that, once, dully. “Something like that.” Sick, yes, if not in the sense Tavros meant. “I kinda want to be left alone. I don’t … I don’t want you to see me.”

“Gamzee.” There was that pause in between the syllables of his name that made his heart lift. It left him feeling more miserable; not all of him wanted to push Tavros away. He wanted touch not to make him ill, and just get that comfort he needed two months ago. Now it might just make him
vomit, and he didn’t want to get him dirty. “What happened?” Tavros said after a pause.

He let out another little laugh. “Conscription, just leave it. Let me be getting my rest and then we can talk, okay?” He didn’t like tricking his friend this way, but maybe it would work.

“Are you going to sleep in the hallway? There is a spare ‘coon downstairs. It would be a lot more comfortable and you wouldn’t have, uhh, nightmares.”

Gamzee fidgeted, trying to avoid Tavros moving his head to catch a glimpse of his face. “No, it’s all good. I be fine to sleep here, you should go to ‘coon though, we’ll talk in the dusk. Go get some sleep.”

Tavros blinked, then his face settled into a look which Gamzee was sure he imagined was confident. “Gamzee, I, uhh, I’m not going to let you make yourself ill.” He reached out and tried to gently take hold of Gamzee’s hand, failing as Gamzee pulled it away. “Come on, come and get some proper sleep. For me?” He smiled, sweetly, adorable as ever. Gamzee felt his heart melting. Seeing a real smile after so long felt … he didn’t have words for it. Okay, maybe it couldn’t hurt just to spend a little time with his old friend before he left. He got up and followed Tavros down the corridor.

“Um, if you don’t mind me asking, why didn’t you reply when I trolled you? Were you really busy? I mean, I didn’t want to interrupt anything, but, uhh, I got a bit worried, and Sollux can only let us have so much time on the computer, but I kept checking and, uhh, you never replied.”

Gamzee paused for a second, before he resumed walking. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s a long story, and I am being too tired to get it all out. Just know I wanted to but was all unable.” He could see them for a moment or two, just avoid that conversation as much as possible. Then he could leave when everyone was less suspicious of him just taking off. He felt a weight on his shoulder and knew it was Tinkerbull resting on it to better keep up with their walk.

“Yeah, I guess we can talk about it later. You’re here now, so we have time to talk. Uhh, no need to do it all right now. We can get some sleep and worry about it later. If you did want to but couldn’t that’s okay.”

“These caves are all confusing.”

“Kanaya thinks they were once, uhh, brooding caverns, a long time ago. So they would be confusing, but you get the, uhh, hang of them after a while.” Gamzee nodded, keeping his head down away from the lights. “He seems to like you a lot,” Tavros said, a smile present in his voice.

“Yeah, seems he does.” It was strange; he didn’t seem to know how to keep a conversation going with them anymore, he was too busy making sure one of Tavros’ rogue glances didn’t see under the shadows or behind the hood. If it was going to be this stressful he would have to leave, he just wanted to relax.

Tavros kept his steps small, still not used to his legs. A silence passed between them as he guided Gamzee down to find the spare cocoon. The faint sound of raised voices could be heard, but they were muffled too much to make out the words. Karkat was probably yelling again, Tavros wondered what someone did this time.

They got close enough to hear the words. Gamzee froze in the doorway as he recognised the voices.
“Wwhy wwouldn’t he wwant it, though? Howw wwere wwe supposed to know he didn’t?”

“Indeed, someone of such prestige being interested in you is quite an honor.”

Karkat’s voice replied. “Yeah, save your talk of honor till you see what else they did to him. I doubt even you could find honor in that.”

“Why don’t you come and look right now?” Gamzee snarled. The crowd turned to face him. He took a deep breath. Everyone was going to find out, might as well get it over with. He reached up, pushed Tinkerbull off his shoulder, and pulled his hood down.

Some of the onlookers gasped. One screamed. Tavros looked shocked. Vriska looked torn between horror and glee. Eridan whimpered and hid behind Equius, who simply stared for a moment, then spoke.

“Gamzee? What did you do?”

Equius’ almost-whispered words seemed loud enough to fill the entire cave system. Gamzee tensed, the words burning into his thinkpan. Not “what happened?” What did you do?

“What did I do? What did I do!” His voice slowly raised in volume. “Does this look like something I would just motherfucking do to myself?” Every troll around him backed up, no doubt feeling the rage rolling off of him. Equius looked at him in something akin to surprise.

“Highblood—”

Gamzee growled and advanced, baring the stubs of his fangs. “Don’t you dare motherfucking call me that. If I never hear that word again I might get a little motherfucking happy. I asked you a fucking question, does this look like I’d ask for it?” He took a few steps forward so he could reach Equius.

“N-not really,” Equius said lamely, backing up slightly and almost tripping over Eridan.

“You wanna know what it was like?” The volume of Gamzee’s voice started to slip out of his control, all his focus on keeping himself from simply launching himself at his foes. He took another step forward. “How about I tear your MOTHERFUCKING HORN out of your MOTHERFUCKING SKULL and SHOVE IT up your MOTHERFUCKING SEEDFLAP so you can FIND OUT?”

Tavros blinked, cuddled Tinkerbull, and murmured “Oh, Gamzee…” as realisation hit him. Gamzee didn’t notice.

Both Eridan and Equius jumped and proceeded to back up a bit more. Gamzee refused to let them escape this. He could feel his posture lower. Both Equius and Eridan were trying to shrink away from him, but the wall was approaching fast. He would have laughed but he didn’t have it in him; instead, a smile found its way onto his lips.

“You wanted,” he whispered again, “to serve. THEN I’LL LET YOU SERVE!”
Equius and Eridan ducked around Gamzee and ran for their lives. Gamzee followed them, loping along like a wolf after a pair of rabbits; even after two months in a cell he could keep pace with them, particularly with anger lending him strength. Karkat and Feferi followed him, running flat out, Feferi shouting “Don’t kill them! Please don’t kill them!”, and several other trolls came behind them, either intending to stop Gamzee or not wanting to miss the show. Even now, Equius and Eridan were arguing, their shouts ensuring they were easily tracked.

“Why are you running? I thought you liked pain!”

“I also like being alive to enjoy it! Shut up and run!”

“Look, one punch from him and I’m down, so can’t you just distract him or somefin’?”

“I refuse to be your meatshield, coward!”

“Why am I the coward? You’re running too!”

“Call it— A door slammed. “-a strategic withdrawal!”

“Are you scared of me?” Gamzee growled, skidding to a halt, looking at the closet door. Rage built up in him, but something kept him from just shoving it all forward and out of him. His fingers wrapped around the handle. “Tell me, what did you think was going to happen? DID YOU THINK IT WAS GOING TO TURN OUT ALL GOOD?” His stubby claws slid down the door. “I asked for advice, I’m just going to MOTHERFUCKING MAKE YOU DO THE SAME MOTHERFUCKING THING.”

“Take it as a compliment! We thought you couldn’t possibly be stupid enough not to know!”

“Shut up shut up shut up!”

“Are you sure you can hold that door?”

“Of course I can—”

There was an ominous click, and Equius fell backwards as the door opened to reveal Gamzee, grinning horribly. He placed one foot on Equius’ unbroken horn, pinning it to the floor, and looked Eridan in the eye.

“This door opens outwards. WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT ME BEING STUPID, FUCKER?”

Eridan giggled nervously. “Aww, c’mon, Gam, be fair, we were in a hurry!”

Equius could have thrown Gamzee off easily, but he remained still, gritted his teeth, and growled “Ampora, I platonically despise you for worsening our fate and I sincerely hope he chokes you with your own babbling tongue!”

“Thanks for the suggestion, BUT IT AIN’T GONNA MOTHERFUCKING SAVE YOU.”

Gamzee fell on them, and the screaming started in earnest.

Tavros looked on nervously, and stuttered “Uhh, shouldn’t we be stopping him?”

Karkat smirked. “Why?”

Gamzee kicked Eridan to the side, watching him crumple and clutch his stomach. His hand wrapped around Equius’ throat, and he pressed his foot against Eridan’s arm. Keeping him pinned, making sure he didn’t lose either of them.
Equius was gasping, his hands fighting to move up to Gamzee’s hand around his throat. Gamzee’s fingers dug in deeper. If he had claws he would be drawing blood, digging in enough to rip out the blueblood’s throat. Eridan struggled under his foot and he pressed down.

“You don’t get to run off AND MOTHERFUCKING HIDE,” he hissed. “You get to watch and feel all this MOTHERFUCKING HAPPEN.” Eridan tried to yank away and shimmy out from his grip. Gamzee growled, shoving Equius down to the floor, and he let go of his rage. He could feel both of them freeze, fears sliding around their heads, and he seeped into their hearts. He took the moment of both of them remaining still to pin Eridan by his horn. He could feel how easy it would be to snap the keratin.

Sporadic and excited energy shuddered over his muscles, and he landed a kick on Equius’ stomach. The blueblood gasped, taken out of the stupor of fear. He tried to struggle back, and Gamzee grabbed him by the hair.

“Don’t you motherfucking like kneeling? Don’t stop now, YOU’RE DOING SO MOTHERFUCKING WELL.” He yanked him forward. Equius’ balance was shaky at best, and he fell. Right into another hit. “I am going to break THE REST OF YOUR MOTHERFUCKING TEETH,” he hissed, leaning down, pressing his foot harder against Eridan. The violetblood screamed. “And I’m going to break open your horn, AND MAKE YOU SUCK OUT THE INSIDES.”

The gathering crowd watched in mixed horror and awe as the strongest troll hatched in centuries took a thorough beating at the hands of an unarmed, half-starved sopor addict. A bronzeblood with broken horns waved her fists and started to shout “Fight! Fight! Fight!” and several others took the chant up. Equius tried to free himself, his reverence for higher blood battling with his desire to live and losing, but he was hampered by his attempts not to cause Gamzee serious harm; he was aware Karkat was watching, and upsetting Karkat in front of the Sufferists would not bode well. Eridan kept up a backdrop of sobs and whimpers of “I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die!”

Finally Karkat stepped forward and yelled “STOP!”

Gamzee paused in his attempts to throttle Equius with his own hair, faced Karkat, and roared with anger. The crowd backed away, going for their weapons. Few had seen a subjugglator in battle rage before, and Gamzee was deep in wrath, only made more terrifying by his scars and sickly features. Chucklevoodoos blazed, terror flaring in the watchers as the light seemed to flicker and faint ghost images surrounded him; if they’d been in any condition to notice, the watchers may have thought it was odd that the ghostly figures seemed to be trying to hold Gamzee back. The deep roar echoed through the caverns, shaking dust from the ceiling, as the crowd watched the tiny mutant face the storm.

“HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONK!”

Gamzee paused in his attempts to throttle Equius with his own hair, faced Karkat, and roared with anger. The crowd backed away, going for their weapons. Few had seen a subjugglator in battle rage before, and Gamzee was deep in wrath, only made more terrifying by his scars and sickly features. Chucklevoodoos blazed, terror flaring in the watchers as the light seemed to flicker and faint ghost images surrounded him; if they’d been in any condition to notice, the watchers may have thought it was odd that the ghostly figures seemed to be trying to hold Gamzee back. The deep roar echoed through the caverns, shaking dust from the ceiling, as the crowd watched the tiny mutant face the storm.

“SHOOOOOOOSH!”

Gamzee raised a hand and swung it, but Karkat ducked under it and rested his own hand on Gamzee’s shoulder. Slowly, he raised it, and brought it back down with a pap.

“SHOOOSH. Shooooosh.”

Gamzee froze, unsure whether he wanted to throw Karkat’s hand off himself. The gesture was pale, very pale, and that kind of thing was what had got him into this mess, but at the same time he craved the affection. Gamzee growled again, lunging at Karkat, something yanking him back and making him stumble forward enough to miss. Karkat, eyes squeezed closed as if expecting a blow, raised his hand again and slid it along Gamzee’s cheek, avoiding the cuts.
“Shoosh,” he said again, softly. Rage shook in Gamzee’s muscles, trying to avoid being evicted. Another pap and slide along his chest. He shivered; both trolls he wanted to hurt were crawling away. He went to turn and there was another touch along his cheek.

His muscles relaxed against his will, his body shuddered. Rage dissipating slowly, but leaving him in the cold. Calmed under pale affection, his rage bubbled but another well timed shoosh stopped him from doing more than just letting out a little honk. Another pap and he went slack, the room making more sense to the onlookers. No longer clouded in darkness and fear.


Karkat helped Gamzee to the floor. It was overwhelming, the need to get him calm and keep him that way, despite Karkat’s mind being fogged by the fear attack Gamzee had managed earlier. The purpleblooded troll was like an overgrown doll, going slack and just letting himself be moved.

Karkat looked over to Equius and Eridan, who were still in the tiny storage room they had tried to lock themselves in, both of them pressed against the far wall and nursing wounds.

“Look, Gamzee, I appreciate you’re mad at them, but if you hurt them any more, you risk killing them. Our medical team is surprisingly good, but our supplies are utter shit, so we might not be able to do anything if you hurt them too badly. I admit I think this whole thing about universal peace and love is hoofbeastshit, but I agree with Me Mark One on one thing, and that is that I will have no killing here. We left conscription to escape death, I’m not having it follow us!” Karkat scowled in the direction of the two wounded trolls, and added “Besides, if you kill them now you can’t beat them up again later.”

“Hey, that was uncalled for!” Eridan protested.

Karkat whirled on him and hissed, softly enough for the crowd not to catch the words, “Shut up, you treacherous bucketslut! Next time, pail your own fucking mentor. Vriska told me you already did everyone else on your ship! Is that the only way you could convince them not to cull you for being the most annoying thing that ever lived?” He whirled on Equius. “And you, you might happily cut your own head off if someone ordered you to, but maybe instead you should try using the fucking thing!” Karkat sighed and looked at the two with contempt, resuming a normal speaking tone. “And, for the record, if you piss Gamzee off or hurt him in any way again and make this worse, I’m taking the shuttle and personally handing you over to Her Imperious Bitchness with shiny Twelfth Perigee’s Eve bows on your horns.”

“Howw wwere wwe supposed to knoww?” Eridan muttered. “It’s not our fault he didn’t realize wwhat was going to happen.”

Equius made a nudging gesture in Eridan’s direction, careful not to actually connect for risk of injuring him. “Ampora, remember I told you to shut up?”

“Equ, I’m serious, howw wwere wwe supposed to knoww?” Gamzee growled against Karkat’s shoulder. The smaller troll patted his back to make sure that the growl didn’t turn into another fight.

“Listen, everyone, we are going to go to sleep. Then we are going to wake up and not let there be another fight, do you understand?” There was a murmur from the watching crowd. “I asked if everyone understood,” Karkat growled. The crowd thinned out. The onlookers were soon gone, leaving the few trolls who Karkat mostly considered friends.

Equius looked up at Terezi, hoping a fellow blue-blood, even a teal, would understand. From the
way she frowned, he guessed quickly that he was wrong.

“Equius, we need to find Nepeta and Aradia and tell them what happened - everything, not just the fight - and we need to tell them right now.” She reached out and offered a hand, mostly a symbolic gesture as she wasn’t strong enough to actually pull him up. “I think it’s better they hear it from you rather than just picking up rumours, and I’d better be there when you tell Aradia. Come on, I think they’re feeding their lusii at the moment.”

Equius hauled himself to his feet and followed Terezi, leaving Eridan alone. Feferi stood over the other sea-troll, an expression of shocked disapproval on her face.

“Fef!” he said hopefully. “I’m so glad to see-”

She grabbed him by the shoulders, pulled him upright, and punched him in the gut hard enough to knock him down again. Eridan collapsed, gasping and clutching his body, tears rising in his eyes. He looked back up at her.

“So wwhat, wwe’re flippin’ back to black this wweek?”

“Eridan.” Feferi shook her head, backing away. “You’re insufferable, I don’t want to see you.”

“Fef. I- but Fef. Wwait.” Eridan tried to scramble up to his feet to follow the quickly-leaving Heiress. He managed to stumble after her fast enough to catch her. “Fef?” He wrapped his hand around her wrist.

“Go away, just go away.” She yanked her hand away, turning to leave. Eridan stood there, his hand still where she had shaken it off.
News of Karkat’s taming of the subjugglator spread throughout the caverns like wildfire, and by the time they got back to the dining hall, they could already hear some younger trolls trying to compose a song about it. It seemed to have confirmed their belief that Karkat was their messiah, much to the annoyance of the troll in question. Gamzee noticed several marks painted on the walls; Karkat’s own symbol, painted in vivid red. Something about the shape was horribly familiar, but he tried to push the thought away.

“So what the hell is going on here?” he finally asked, eyes flicking from one painted symbol to another, not looking at Karkat or Tavros, as he sat on the bench and drank the soup they had fetched for him. It was bland and watery, and his lack of proper teeth meant he had to pick the few chunks of unidentifiable meat and vegetation apart with his fingertips. It was the best thing he had ever eaten in his life. Tears came to his eyes and he had to force himself to eat at a normal rate; it would be a cruel irony if he choked on the first food he’d eaten as a free troll, food that he hadn’t had to bargain for.

“Um.” Karkat looked uncomfortable. “This is a bit of an awkward revelation, but have you had a good look at my eyes recently?”

“Uh, is now really the time for that?”

“That wasn’t a solicitation. I mean it, take a look.”

Gamzee looked up from his bowl and over to his friend, looking at his eyes as requested. It would have been a lot easier if Karkat wasn’t looking down at the table like it was the most interesting thing in the world. Still, he caught the color flashing under his lashes. Karkat looked like he was debating with himself, and eventually he lifted his chin to look into Gamzee’s eyes.

“I’ll be a motherfucking cluckbeast dancing headless.” Gamzee tried not to smile. Or do anything that might make his best friend, now moirail, upset. “So that’s why you stopped doing webcam chats after you pupated. You’re a mutant.”

Karkat sighed, dropping his head into his palm. “Yes, yes I am. Thank you for stating the obvious.”

“Do you think I be having a problem with it, my hot-blooded best friend? Do I look like I give any motherfucks about the hemocaste anymore, or did I ever be giving it my time of night? Is that why these people all want to be following you?”

Karkat nodded. “Yeah, my ancestor was apparently some weird preacher, he was all about how peace, love, and understanding will change the world. Told Alternia it didn’t have to be violent. Of course that didn’t sit well with the higherbloods.”

“Don’t suspect it would.”

“He was executed, but his teachings lived on. The cult’s existed since his execution, but in secret, hidden away. They found us as we were trying to find a place to hide out to help train Feferi for her big defeat-the-Empress battle. Found out I was the second coming of ‘His Great Suffering’. But they think I’m a little too mean, and I put too much into the hemocaste.” Karkat sighed. “I think they just want to reverse it and subject the higher castes to the pain of the lower ones. But they are trying to help us and they are backing Feferi’s fight for the throne. Though it’s really begrudgingly and I think they hope she loses so we can go to war.”
“You don’t want to be up and fucking with the Empress. Just trust me on that. She would plow through all of them quick, she got too much backing her,” Gamzee mumbled. “But if it is Feferi who be fighting her, she might go with most of the tradition especially if it is all up and public. She would have to keep up appearances.”

Karkat looked at Gamzee’s scarred fingertips, and swallowed hard. “Uh. I guess you don’t want to talk about it, and even if you did I don’t think I’d know what to say, but … fuck, Gamzee, I am so sorry.” His voice choked slightly and he blinked; Gamzee guessed it was a habit of Karkat’s to force away tears, to conceal his pigmentation, and felt another stab of pity. “If I’d had any idea I’d have got you out sooner, I swear.”

“I don’t reckon you could have. I was… I was locked up, it was just luck I got out the same time as your crew showed up.” Gamzee’s lip twitched. “Maybe it was a miracle.”

Karkat smiled weakly in response. “Maybe. Okay, I don’t even know where to begin helping you, but if I can, tell me how. And if I ever meet your ancestor, I swear I will rip his bulge out with my fucking teeth and nail it to his forehead.”

Gamzee’s own faint smile disappeared entirely, and he shifted awkwardly. “Why?”

“Why?”

“Why would you help me?” Gamzee twisted his fingers together awkwardly, not able to say what he was actually thinking; he wasn’t worthy of help. A used and broken moirail-bastard didn’t deserve a moirail of his own.

“Why wouldn’t I help you? You’re my friend… Well, I guess it’s more now, but you’re my friend at the very least. And despite that being a really insensitive fucking question, I am going to ignore it and cut you some slack and not shout your ear off.”

“I’ll be honored that you be cutting me any kinds of slack - that ain’t something common from you, Karkat.” Gamzee tried to give him a little smile again, his face still not exactly working like it once had.

“Is there any way I can help you?”

“Make sure you don’t get caught. If I get all caught up in their claws again, it’ll be okay. I mean I might up and die, but that’s okay too. More than likely I’d be put through hell. But I can’t be letting anything like that be happening to all of you.” Karkat was staring at him, and he could almost watch how much his words disturbed the smaller troll. “If it all comes to pass that they be catching up to us, and they will, I all humiliated them by escaping, plus all you were slumming around his ship and didn’t get caught. They’ll come after their pride.”

“They’ll?” Karkat raised an eyebrow, his fingers knitted just so he wouldn’t clench them. “There was more than one?”

Gamzee swallowed nervously; he didn’t think his warning would get him caught like this. He nodded slowly, spinning the bowl in his fingers trying to avoid this awkward line of questioning.

“How many?” Karkat asked slowly, his words said through clenched teeth.

“Two,” Gamzee said softly. “That’s how I know everything, because the both of them all talked about things around me.” Gamzee’s words were coming faster. He could feel himself getting warm, panic starting in his stomach and spreading out to the rest of him. “Never about you, my ancestor knew about you all but he said he’d keep it secret long as I was good. But I up and left, so she’s
gonna know now. I guess it’s good I know that, right? Because I can make sure they don’t-“

“Gamzee, shhh,” Karkat said, resting his hand on the table between them. A mock way to touch him without actually doing it. “It’s okay, you don’t have to say more than you want. You’re not required to say anything here.”

Gamzee nodded and took a moment to focus on his breathing, counting up and down to and from ten. He needed to get these panic attacks under control, or he was going to just be walking and one was going to hit him and he’d never recover. His eyes flashed around the room and the red painted sigil on the wall made his bloodpusher pound. “Karkat, I know that’s your sign, but why is it all your sign? Was it your ancestor’s?” Gamzee asked suddenly.

“My ancestor didn’t have a sign. Mutants don’t usually get them,” Karkat said, frowning. “That symbol was taken by the Sufferists after his death. It…” He sighed. “It’s the shape of the shackles which held him at his execution. From what I hear his posthumous title is pretty damn accurate.”

Gamzee’s eyes widened and his breathing sped up again, his eyes going to the abrasion scars on his wrists. Karkat followed his gaze, and mouthed “oh shit”. He looked up.

“They- they used the same kind of-” He thought back, as much as it pained him to the words they spoke. He found himself blocking everything else out but the conversation. Still the thought of their voices alone made a cold shudder pass over his skin.

“They used the same kind of… What?” Karkat said, his eyebrow raised slightly. “The same kind of shackles?”

Gamzee nodded. “Wait, no. They said something about… ‘reclaimed’… Shit. I think they might have… might have been the exact same fucking set.”

Karkat stared for a moment and then looked over to the sign painted on the wall, then back to Gamzee. There was no practical way the would be the same unless Gamzee’s ancestor had some serious connections. He would have had to have been young, during the Sufferer’s lifetime. They didn’t know the exact date, but it was forever and a day ago. Purplebloods lived a long time, but not usually that long, even if their lives were usually only cut short because of their violent lifestyle.

“Are you sure, Gamzee?”

“Not a hundred percent, but I up and couldn’t forget them. They were weird on the inside. they were irritating enough I could ignore some of what was going on. Until it got all painful, then they were something to focus on. I never got a really good look at them, I was pretty out of it by the time I could really move my neck. But I thought they were strange when I kind of saw them. They were shaped similar, my ancestor said something about them being a trophy…” Gamzee grimaced at how terrible those words sounded.

He heard Tavros sniffle. He’d almost forgotten he was there, as he’d remained silent through the conversation, sitting and clutching Tinkerbull like a lifeline. Tears were starting to trickle down his face, and he looked at Gamzee with an expression which suggested he desperately wanted to do something, anything, to help.

Gamzee looked over at him and almost went to raise a hand to touch him. He lost his nerve to sickness before he could do it. “It’s okay, bro,” he said softly. “At least I’m here now.” He could almost watch Tavros’ lower lip shake before he pushed it between his teeth. He swallowed, trying to stem his tears. Tavros shifted Tinkerbull in his arms, before he offered him over to Gamzee. The tiny bull squeaked and jumped on Gamzee’s shoulder.
“He must have known you needed comfort. Lusii, they, uhh, tend to know.” The bull moved off his shoulder and towards his lap. “If I can’t comfort you, at least he can,” Tavros added quietly. Gamzee let himself smile a little, moving his hands to pet Tinkerbull’s neck.

A cackle nearly as obnoxious as Terezi’s nearly made the trio jump out of their skins. It turned out to belong to the broken-horned bronzeblood, a girl of about six sweeps, who jumped up onto the bench beside Karkat, grinning.

“I saw what you did back there! That was so fucking cool!” she squealed. She looked at Gamzee and mock-growled, waving her hand like a cat batting at a mouse. “And I don’t usually say that about shit that ended without bloodshed, ya know!”

“Go away, Medine,” Karkat growled. She ignored him. Gamzee raised an eyebrow at the girl, who was still waving her hand on occasion. Not close enough to be a threat, but obviously it was supposed to imply one. She was still crouching on the bench, but now leaning closer to Karkat.

“That was awesome. You might not be as peaceful as ‘His Suffering’, but you got his skills. Managing to face and calm the Grand Highblood’s spawn without even breaking a sweat. Anyone who doubted before is going to believe now. I get to live in such a perfect time here. I wasn’t stuck when it was just hiding from the empire.” She laughed. “You know, I thought the whole Sufferer thing was kind of stupid, I was just hanging out here to be with my moirail, but I dunno, you’ve got me thinking there’s something to it. The old crew’s all here now, we’ve got a Summoner, a Disciple, a Darkleer, a Dolorosa, a Psioniiic, even a Redglare, so I guess a Highblood was gonna show up - I was kinda hoping for an epic strife when he did, but this is cool too…”

Karkat looked over to Medine, a question in his eyes, before shifting his view to look over to Gamzee then back to her. “Repeat to me what you just said.” Gamzee shifted uncomfortably. Tinkerbull, noticing the disturbance, began to nuzzle against his hand.

“What, you didn’t know about your bloodlink?” Medine said, looking at Gamzee and wrinkling her nose. “Some of the guys didn’t believe me because you’re not wearing the right sign, but I heard what Lereal said about how you’re his descendant and you look like the pictures of him…” She saw his expression change, but instead of backing away, she tensed into a fighting position. “Oh, cool, now you wanna strife me? Awesome, Jerric is never gonna believe me! C’mon, I snapped off my own fucking horns and stabbed a violetblood’s eyes out, you think you can take me? Aww yeah!”

“Hey, kid, if I wanted to up and fight you I wouldn’t be giving you any type of warning. You’d just be attacked, and you ain’t got the horns to do that again. Plus I don’t think I’d be feeling it if my eyes all left me. Not too sure if I can up and be in pain anymore. For the record, I know about my own motherfucking ancestor, believe you me. Anyway, that ain’t what I wanted you to repeat. I was more wondering how long all you been motherfucking hiding out. Not just the trolls I got my acquaintance with. I want to know how long he’s been knowing about you. He up and knew there was a rebel group. That’ll depend on how stupid until the fleet up and comes.”

“Cult’s been here since the Sufferer… Suffered. They chose this location as time went on because of all the scripture they found on the walls.” Medine shrugged. “Never been too into it, you’d have to talk to someone who puts stock in the whole Sufferer thing,” Karkat was still staring dumbfounded between the both of them.

“Uhh, maybe you should leave?” Tavros said to the girl, who scowled.

“Fine, fine. Sheesh, Vantas, why’d you have to suck all the fight out of him before I could have a go? Ah, I should go feed Ratmom anyway.” She hopped off the bench, turned on her heel, and scurried off.
Gamzee shook his head, bringing one hand up to his forehead. “That girl better check herself. If the fleet comes and she tries my ancestor in combat she’s gonna turn into bonemeal, or worse a skeleton. Hope her moirail keeps her from being dumb enough to try.” He tried to ignore both Karkat and Tavros, who were looking at him. As if to mimic his charge, Tinkerbull’s eyes fixed on him too.

“Gamzee,” Karkat said softly. “Gamzee…” He tried again, his voice a little louder.

“Yeah?” He looked over at Karkat. “Sorry if I didn’t want to mention it. Ain’t in me to really like hearing that name, or my own sign name for that matter. I was hoping to up and leave it until it rotted away.”

“You could have mentioned it.”

“Someone had to be mentioning it to you before you set off to go get me. The Makara name was the only reason I got any type of far when I was escaping. Couldn’t have been unknown in a rebel group.”

“I don’t know, I always just thought of him as the ‘Grand Highblood’ if I thought of him at all. Or ‘that fucking mountain of purple’. I guess I must have heard his name somewhere but it didn’t connect…” Karkat ran a hand through his hair, nervously. “Shit, shit, shit. He was the one-”

“Yeah.” Gamzee said softly. “Do me a favor never refer to him again as ‘that fucking mountain of purple’ again.” He tried to crack a smile, even if it was a little forced.

“Can do…” Karkat was rotating between shaking his head, licking his lips, and fidgeting with his hands. Gamzee knew from experience that meant he had something he wanted to say but didn’t know if he should.

“Just ask.” Gamzee said rolling his eyes slightly. It was going to come out he might as well have it sooner rather than later.

“Who was the other one? Another purple blood?”

“No. Though that would have been spectacular,” Gamzee paused, taking a deep breath. “Better than the em— ty— one it was.” He couldn’t even bring himself to say that. “Just know she was a sadistic bitch and I would rather talk about my ancestor than her. That ain’t saying much, I’d rather not talk about either of them. I platonically hate her more than anything in the whole fucking universe.”

“Shit. Oh God, did I actually say I was going to rip out the Grand Highblood’s-”

“Yes.”

Karkat leaned on the table, looking shaken. “Please tell me only you two heard that. I don’t want my crazier followers to take it for a prophecy.”

“I think we were the, uhh, only ones who did Karkat. But I don’t think they’d think that was a prophecy. More a, uhh, to-do list. Which I don’t want them to, uhh, think either.”

Karkat groaned and sagged onto the table. “This is when I wished prayers worked or were a thing.”

“I can all pray that no one heard you say that, but I don’t think the spirits would be too pleased with your thoughts on messing up their prophet. So, maybe it’s better if I don’t,” Gamzee said with a shrug.

“I don’t need anything else working against me, so that might be for the best.” Karkat pulled himself
up from the table, trying to reclaim a somewhat composed manner. “So, the Grand Highblood knows where we are.”

“Yeah, he does. Don’t know how, I was trying to see how he was all being in the knowing. Did any of you message me saying you had found the cult?”

“I don’t honestly know, I didn’t mention it. I just said we were okay, and wanted to let you know that my promise still stood. I didn’t get specific. For all I know someone else mentioned it. Tavros, you didn’t, right?”

“No, I more just wanted to talk. Just said we were, uhh, all okay. I mentioned when we got, uhh, the other two back. Though I only said that, uhh, they were with us now. You told us all to be discreet.”

“Trust me there could have been knowing without any of you. He is pretty connected to everything that happens in the empire. I would say he’s always watching, but that’s just me being paranoid. But I know he’ll up and come, ain’t nothing to hold him back no more. He said he’d keep you all secret for me. I ain’t there no more, so he’ll come.” Despite Gamzee claiming it was paranoia, the hand connected to his branded forearm balled into a fist. He feared that his mark was a tracking beacon. It wouldn’t be the first time something mythical happened around him. This one just wasn’t in his favor. “We’ve all gotta get out of here.”

“What?” Karkat blinked. “All of us? Yeah, because a couple hundred trolls suddenly packing up and travelling cross-country is totally inconspicuous-”

“We’ve gotta do something!” Gamzee thumped the table. “We can’t stay here, we’ll be found.” He glanced around at the other trolls in the room. Most of them were young; wrigglers, conscription-age, a few lucky adults who’d survived there without being found. Many were crippled or infirm, those being the ones with most reason to flee the Empire. “I’m not gonna sit here and hand a bunch of wrigglers over to him.”

- 

A/N: Medine and Jerric are on loan from the lovely av-marten, a.k.a. pitviperofdoom. Thanks for letting us use your fantrolls!
Chapter 8
Chapter by chelonianmobile

Karkat decided it was too early in the evening to be having this debate. He had only woken up thirty minutes ago after the most terrible and interesting dawn of his life. Lereal was nearly shouting, which usually was an accomplishment. This evening it was just obnoxious.

“I don’t care if he has documents saying they know. There is no way they can, unless one of your friends said, or he let it slip. It would be just like a subjugglator to say something to their cult.”

“News flash, we’re a cult too. And I don’t think Gamzee was in any condition to tell the.. him anything.”

“No, you’re right. I don’t think he did, he was too busy-” Lereal’s voice wasn’t soft enough to be a whisper.

“Watch,” Karkat growled, “your next words carefully.”

“Listen, Lereal,” Vriska chimed in. “As much as I would love to ambush the Empire, I’m pretty sure Gamzee knows more than we do.”

“Mr Grape Faygo wouldn’t steer us wrong. Not with things like this.”

“He would, if his loyalties were to his ancestor.”

“I don’t…” Tavros started. “His loyalties aren’t to his ancestor any more than Feferi’s are to hers,” he said, his voice stronger.

Lereal sighed and shook his head. “I don’t know. I understand you’re afraid, but-”

“Damn right we are, we’d have to be stupid not to be!” Karkat snarled. “In case you hadn’t noticed, most of the cult is made up of kids and cripples, and not even all that many of them. I don’t see how we can take on an entire Empire’s worth of adult trolls.”

“Trained adult trollth, not juth any old adult trollth either. All of them are highly trained, we’re lucky we’ve managed to get any type of training in between all the other work we have to do. There are just enough handth that thtuff getth done but not enough to truly have a thtanding army.”

“They will come here, and tear Alternia apart, and the killing won’t stop at us. Once they’re here they’ll go hive to hive, checking signs and allegiances.” Karkat paused long enough for breath. “They attack here and every young troll and wriggler on this planet in in danger of being forced through not only an inquisition, but blood checks, fear enough to turn in their friends, being killed for simply being a little afraid of the adult trolls.”

“They would not attack Alternia,” Lereal scoffed. “Not even to snuff out a small rebellion that isn’t really doing much right now. They have no reason to go after us, other than your friends.” The way he said the word “friends” was biting and disgusted.

“They are painting uth as proactive, thaying we kill indithcirminately, we are being painted as the worth of two evilth,” Sollux protested. “Change is thcary enough for trolls, at leath they know what they get with the Empreth. Feferi ith a wild card. They’re telling every troll in the empire that we are making there be a food thortage, not to mention all the other problemth they’ll invent.”
“No, a rebel group under the Heiress is doing that.”

“Are you saying…” Karkat slammed his hands down on the table, “…that I throw Feferi under a stampede to protect this long enough we can come up with a frontal attack?!”

“No, I’m saying we can cut our dead weight and give them empire something to blame. It would be enough of a trade.”

“Right now the only hope this failure of a rebellion has is Feferi. A once in 400 sweep chance at actually causing some changes through thoughtfully applied violence. A true chance at something resembling peace for everyone.”

“You’re young, and I respect that you’re scared. I also understand you want to protect your friends. However, some sacrifices must be made.”

“Do you know,” Gamzee said slowly, “if you hand Feferi over, they’re still going to go after the rest of you?”

“Then we can hand you over too.” Lereal’s eyes narrowed. “They have no reason, other than the both of you, to pursue us.”

“No, they got plenty of reasons. I can probably tell you all of them. But even if you handed me and Feferi over to them, they’d still be looking for all of you. You need to move, off planet if possible. Staying here is suicide.”

“He’s right,” said Aradia, looking at Gamzee, or at least he thought for a moment she was looking at him. Her glassy red eyes were actually fixed on a point behind him. He didn’t think too much of it; he was distracted by the argument, and his spooky sis had been weird even before she got her robot parts anyway.

“What better time will there ever be to make our move?” Lereal was saying. “The descendants of the Sufferer himself and all his greatest followers are with us! What could be a better omen?”

“The subjugglator ship being struck by a comet might help!” Terezi butted in.

“Yeah,” said Vriska. “I mean, nobody is keener for a fight than me, but I have to admit I don’t think this will work. I wasn’t on the crew that recovered Gamzee, but recovering Equius was difficult. They’re fully ready to take anything down.”

“We’re not boarding their ships, that was the major risk. We are going to meet them in space, our ships against theirs.”

“What, all thirty of them versus the thousands of the Empire? Those aren’t good odds, they aren’t even decent.”

“They can’t mobilize them all at once, we’ll catch them off guard. We fly in as stealthily as possible, send scout ships beforehand, then when we are close enough we focus on damaging the ships’ undersides. Most of them have their main systems in the belly of their ship. We destroy those and we’ve won.”

“I don’t sanction this attack,” Karkat said. “If you want to go and get killed, by all means - I’m not one to stand in the way of another troll wanting to off themselves. But if you’re the only one going, this is the most illogical plan in the universe and that’s saying something.”

“If you go,” Aradia said softly, her words broken up strangely, “all those you take will die. If your
ships are not destroyed you will be forced to deal with a subjugurator interrogation. The Sufferer could not even dream of saving you in the Tents.”

“Are all of you in the camp that we will fail? We have ships, surprise, and the best omens in sweeps. There is no need to be pessimistic! This attack could be the turning-point for peace.”

“At what cost? How many lives are you going to sacrifice for this mission?”

“As many as necessary to save billions more!” Lereal shouted.

Karkat took a step back. “Okay, you’re fucking insane.”

“And you are all a disgrace to your ancestor’s memories, you cowards, every one of you.”

Karkat threw up his hands. “Fine, you know what? Take whoever you can get to agree to go on this mission. Go. I’m staying here, I don’t have any intention of getting myself killed fruitlessly. I know our best bet, I know what has the most chance to win. We’re at even more of an advantage now then we were three nights ago. If they want to go on the suicide mission let them. Just before all of you leave Alternia, I’m going to tell them my thoughts.”

“We are tired of hiding away, it is time the universe knows peace.”

“Through a frontal assault,” Terezi said, shaking her head.

“The Summoner rebelled in a similar fashion.”

“And the Summoner ended up dead.” Karkat was shaking his head as well.

“His horns sawn off,” Aradia said softly. “After dinner.” Karkat turned to look at her, but quickly looked back at Lereal.

“This time it will work. I wouldn’t ask you be on the ships anyway. We need you ready to come once our attack is finished. We don’t want to put you in any unnecessary risk. Are any of you,” Lereal paused long enough to look around the room at the twelve gathered trolls, “going to come?”

Their stony stares were all the answer he needed. He sighed, stalked towards the door, and yanked it open, revealing two wide-eyed maroonbloods. “I told you not to eavesdrop. But never mind - go tell everyone to prepare for an attack. The time is upon us! We strike now!” He curled his index fingers inwards to rest on his thumbs, pressed the tips of his thumbs together, and extended his middle fingers, forming an approximation of the Vantas symbol. “Let them suffer!”
They had done all they could. The ships had just taken off from where they had been hidden. Only the twelve of them were left, walking in the caves in a dark silence. They were going to listen to the attack’s broadcast. Not on the off-chance that the cultists might actually take the Empire down; instead, for how close the Fleet actually was to eliminating the “threat”, also known as right where they were.

Sollux was guiding them down to the monitoring room. No one wanted to say anything. Trolls weren’t known for their attachment to other trolls, but sending upwards of two hundred and fifty trolls to their death wasn’t a matter of attachment. It was trying to prevent unnecessary stupidity.

Sollux was looking very ill. Nobody asked why. They already knew the voices of the soon-to-die must have been coming at him worse than ever. Feferi clutched his hand as they walked. Gamzee tried to control his breathing. This was his fault. Why had he tried to escape, why had he stayed? It was his presence which had meant Karkat had to calm him, spreading the story drew attention to them again and put that stupid idea in Lereal’s head …

The monitoring room was cramped with all of them inside of it. Sollux sat down, pressing one hand to his temple. He clicked a few buttons, and managed to get the signal in from the right frequency. He groaned, as the signal was muddy, static, and he’d have to fix it. His head was throbbing, and he really didn’t have the patience for it. He shook his head and moved to turn the knobs, the voices flaring in his head. Screaming at him to help, to stop, to prevent it. He knew even if he got the frequency exact and sent a message over none of them would stop. He fiddled with the knob until the signal came in with less static.

“Thith ith ath good ath it’th going to get. I don’t have the patience to do much more.” His friends nodded; at least they weren’t giving him shit about it, if they did he was going to have to force them to beat themselves up with his psionics.

Lereal’s voice came over the speakers, making sure everyone was in position, calculating a timeframe for arrival, and making sure all of them were charging up their weapons. Sollux groaned and leaned forward onto the desk, barely able to hear the talk over the voices. Feferi’s hand curled around his shoulder and gripped. It wasn’t much, but at least he knew that when the soon-to-be-dead became just-the-dead, he could get a head massage.

“Okay, do we have an escape plan for if- I mean when this goes south?” Karkat said, doing a rapid headcount just in case they’d somehow lost someone in the tunnels.

“We do,” Vriska said, nodding. “Not a great one, but better than nothing.”

“Should I even ask?”

“There is one ship left. It’s an old tugship, we’ll leave with the remaining supplies and head out somewhere. There is a debate going on between a few of us, mostly me and Sollux, about which planet would be best.” Vriska rarely sounded as serious as she did now. “The ship isn’t much, but it should be usable. Hopefully we have enough food and water. There isn’t enough room for any extra problems, and there is a chance we might not have enough.”

“How long can a troll go without food or water?” Karkat asked.
“Depends on the blood,” Nepeta said softly. “Water is about two weeks. Food ranges from one month to eight.”

“Alright. So we can only be short two weeks of water and one month of food. We can manage that, even if we have to gather more quickly.”

“Check-in,” Lereal’s voice echoed around the room. “ETA five hundred; everyone ready to launch an attack?”

“The fleet is that close?” Terezi said leaning forward. “They’ll be there by tonight. I wonder if that’s the main group or the outer ships.”

“How long until they’re here?”

“They could be here tonight, but more than likely they aren’t totally mobilized. They usually only do that when they’re about an hour off.”

“How long do we actually have for our back-up plan?” Karkat could feel his heart starting to pound in his chest.

“I’d say,” Eridan’s voice was small. “About three days to a week. Right?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s how long it would take.” Equius chimed in as well. “The bigger ships take longer. I assume there will be bigger ships.”

“There will be,” Gamzee said, ignoring his anger at the both of them for the present problem. “They ain’t going to be missing out. So, I think you’re right, a few days at least. There going to debate on who and what teams they’re going to send.”

“How much of a head start can we get? It won’t be much use if we only get ready to leave with seconds to spare.”

“We already packed some stuff into the ship,” Eridan said. “Not full to bursting, but if we have to go sooner than we thought, we can.”

“And if all else fails…” Terezi pulled a pill bottle out of her sylladex. “These’ll make sure it’s quick and painless.”

“We have some time.” Karkat swallowed nervously. “Should we pack up more in the time between? We know this isn’t going to work, so maybe we should be prepared for a swift escape. I don’t really want to take death pills.”

“You ain’t the only one, brother. I don’t really want to stick around listening to them try to gloat, I’d be better put to moving supplies.”

“They should make fleetfall just before dawn. One or two of us could stay down here and call the others - don’t we have the hand-communicators?”

“Every second they’re out there tells us how far the first wave is from us… It might be better if we just rush instead of someone mishearing it.”

“There are enough supplies to make it to either of the target planets suggested. As long as we ration them appropriately and maintain the course at a normal ship’s pace.”

“We know the tugship works. We just don’t know how fast it goes. It could be as fast as a normal
ship or it could be slower. It’s a relic.”

“Alright, leader’s order; if we have enough then we all stay down here and listen. We calculate, if they are too close then we book it out of here, captchaloguing as we go. If it’s a week, we hustle out of here as the sun is coming up. It’s risky, but a week lead isn’t much of one. Those aren’t good odds, they get even smaller as the number of days shrink. We need as much time as we can get. Does everyone understand?”

The others nodded, and a deadly silence spread over the room. The only sound was the static, and low mumbles of ships working far from them, somewhere near the approaching fleet. Every troll in the room could feel the tension; they knew this would fail, but all of them held out hope at least some of the cult would realize this was suicide.

“We’ve got drone fighters at twenty degrees toward Telleron. Take them out,” one of the ships leaders said. Then there was the sound of cannon fire.

Sollux gasped and clutched his head again as a brief scream and an explosion sounded. “Okay, that’s one of ourth down,” he said through gritted teeth. Aradia and Feferi shifted closer to him.

“Check in.” Lereal’s voice appeared after the cannon fire ceased. Only one ship lost to the drone fighters. But that meant that the fleet was now aware of their presence. The room was tense as time wore on, occasional conversation over the communicator did nothing to resolve it. They seemed cocksure that their success over a few drone fighters predicted the battle.

“The fleet’s just deployed something.”

“Any more details?”

“No, it was moving fast. Only one thing, not ships yet.”

“Keep us posted.”

“More are deploying, different things, they are larger than the firs—” There was a gasp and the start of a scream before the line was cut. Sollux groaned, clutching his temples.

“Hello? Deritt, check in. Deritt!” The line stayed silent.

“They alwayth get tho much louder right before.” Sollux’s voice was strained, the heels of his palms pressing harder into his temples.

“Shit, four of our ships are down,” a panicked voice said over the com. “Gone. More are being deployed.”

“How many?”

“Too many.” The voice was shaking, and over the distortion Karkat couldn’t place it. “I can’t count. None of us can. The—” The speakers vibrated as some noise whipped through the ship. There was a sound of rushing, and machinery cracking, splintering, breaking.

“Those of you who can, send your ships up to overdrive, go up and back them up.”

There was a chiming of affirmation from a series of ships. before the line went quiet waiting for any type of news about how many and hearing any of the enemy ships going down. Silence was just as sickening as the sounds of death. Every ship could be destroyed and they wouldn’t fully know. Not if Lereal was staying back. He could not tell them until he arrived on Alternia then they’d have to
fight the whole fleet here.

Karkat was half tempted to pick up the transmitter and start asking for a report. He didn’t want to distract them, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know how many ships were left. Another communicator clicked on, then off. Then on again.

“They’re rapidly approaching, there’s too many of them-” That voice went silent and Sollux’s head bobbed, gritting his teeth from the pain. There was silence, and then coms started clicking in to report.


Static.

“Someone help! We’ve been boarded, I think everyone’s dead, someone help me-” Screaming, the sound of breaking bones.

More static.

“-mutiny, Faraoh!”

“I don’t care, we’re getting out! Vesper, take the controls.”

“You suck, Jerric, I wanted to stay and fight!”

“You’ll thank me later-”

Static.

“Well, that ship th going to make it a while,” Sollux said, looking drained. “I can’t hear them. Or I might jutht be mithing them with all the othert …”

“In what world did they think two-hundred-fifty trolls could go against the Empire?” Karkat mumbled as another com turned on long enough to be cut off.

“More drones?”

“Not if they’re being boarded” Equius said shifting forward from his position against the wall. “That response was quick… Too quick.”

“Did we have someone reporting back? A traitor in our midst?”

“Perhaps, or they were expecting a frontal attack.”

“The fleet is always expecting an attack,” Eridan said. “But you’re right, that wwas quick.”

“Which branch?” Gamzee said suddenly. “Who is boarding? That’ll tell us their response times.”

“Unless you can talk to the dead, I don’t think we can get that answer.”

Gamzee cursed to himself and leaned towards the speakers. A lot of static as the fighting was going on.

“Wait… this is hardwired into the cult’s flagship. They’re quiet, beyond moving, the attack hasn’t made it to them yet,” Karkat said. “The ships that were attacked were the ones that left earlier, their scout ships are gone, their hyperdrive able ships are gone….”
One of the coms came on. No noise, instead the line stayed open. There was a long silence, one that made it hard for other coms to check into Lereal’s mainfeed, though by the way Sollux was twitching and nearly screaming it meant that their ships were being destroyed. One right after the other. It wasn’t fast enough Sollux could get a break. One would go down, then enough time for him to listen to the chatter of other voices. Then another would go down. At least he didn’t have to hear it over the radio as well.

“Who is keeping this line open?” Lereal’s voice was between anger and panic. The silence kept on for a long moment. Then there was a laugh. Gamzee stiffened beside Karkat, moving back against the wall.

“Who is on the other side of this line?”

Gamzee swallowed. He could feel a cold sweep over his body. He shuddered, a cold sweat breaking over his skin.

“I order you to tell me your name.”

“Let’s just say, I’m your messenger of death. But I’m not here to talk to you. You’re just a poor little rebel, who believes in peace and harmony when it’s convenient. It’s thoughts that like that make you bring your death to you sooner.” The line was silent. Gamzee’s breath shuddered in his chest. “No more orders? Too bad.”

“Who are you trying to talk to?”

Sollux leaned forward, gasping, holding the scream in his throat.

“Let me pull out the list, it’s a bit lengthy.” There was a moment of silence. “Here we are… well, that is a lot of names. Only one of them knows who is talking, so he is the only one I care about right now. I haven’t met the rest of them just yet.”

Gamzee couldn’t control his throat; it let out a squeak. Pressing back against the wall, he swallowed, trying to tell himself that this wasn’t happening. He could see everyone in the room staring at the radio like it might give them answers. It was like tunnel vision, and slightly floating above his body.

“I know you’re listening, and I have to say, bravo. Finally, fighting. You took us by such surprise. At first we thought it was just the depressingly boring rebel group, then wouldn’t you know it, you managed something.” There was a soft chuckle over the speakers. “To think what you managed and how you did it. I watched your footage, little one - tell me, how do the clothes fit? Are they more comfortable than the ones I gave you?”

Gamzee whined in his throat, his fists balling at his sides, and he could feel the sting from each word even through the static of the radio. He would have been amazed at how well his words worked if he wasn’t fighting the urge to curl up in the corner and just cry until the voice was gone and he could just be alone.

“That aside, though perhaps that adds to my feelings, I can’t believe I have to use this venue to tell you how proud I finally am. It only took, what, two months? Then again, you couldn’t even fight face to face. No, you had to run. So I rescind my pride, maybe you’ll get it back when we meet again.”

Gamzee wrapped his arms around his core, and now everyone was looking at him. He could feel it, though his eyes were closed too tightly to actually see it. He was trying to control his breathing and remind himself that he was in the caves on Alternia, he was not back there.
“You know we will see each other again, right? And when we do…” There was a chuckle, a dark menacing chuckle. “I get all your little friends, too. Both of us are looking forward to meeting all of them. I hoped we would have met sooner, but seeing as you were actually smart enough not to come on this misguided attempt at a battle… Instead I’m here for press alone.” A pause. “I’ve seen some pictures. I noticed some terribly familiar faces.”

Gamzee’s fingers dug into his sides. He wanted to launch himself forward and grab the microphone and talk back. Defend his friends, bargain even though they had a backup plan. He had to focus on something else, other than how well the mind games still worked.

“It was her idea, saying that I cared for you, that I was grooming you. Best thing about this is, you are dead to the Empire, I end up more violent, with an excuse, then in the end you’re actually alive to deal with the repercussions of your actions. I see no downside to this. Of course, we could strike a deal.”

Gamzee whined, folding in on himself, he could feel his legs getting weak. He convinced himself he wasn’t going to grab the microphone and allow the game to work. Either they got out or took suicide pills; either way the only threat was their dead bodies, and at that point they were dead. It really didn’t matter.

“You turn yourself in. You and all your friends come quietly into the night. We say you died due to torture, your friends died on these ships. You do that, and I’ll go easy on you, I’ll be kind with your punishment. And I’ll make sure that each and every one of your ridiculously familiar friends gets it easy. All but Feferi and Sollux. I have no rights to them, so I can’t make any promises.”

There was a much closer gasp, and the faintest hint of another noise. Gamzee moved forward, almost as if it was against his will, except he was very aware of what he was doing. He grabbed the microphone.

“Fuck you,” he growled.

“You did.”

“Har-de-har. Some comedian you are. Fuck off.”

“You’ll regret not agreeing, my little clown. But you’ve made your choice. I’ll be seeing you soon enough to make sure you regret it.” There was a click, before the communicator turned back on. “Oh yes, I almost forgot. Sorrow drown your enemies.” The com went quiet.

“What the fuck was that?” Lereal chimed in. There was silence, then the sound of crunching metal, wires cracking, the ship folding on itself. There was a gasp and half of Lereal’s name came out of another troll’s mouth. Than glass shattered, they could almost hear the suction, the screams of the crew lost to space, before the com was thrown into an unnatural silence. Sollux shuddered in his chair, his head now matching the silence from the communicator.

Karkat broke the dead silence.

“We should be running.”

Feferi and Aradia hauled Sollux upright, and the group cleared the room in record time.
Chapter 10

It was surprisingly simple to captchalogue as they ran through the caves. Not enough time to move all the way down to the deep storage, but deep enough they could gather more food, and water. A few other things here and there, but priority number one was to get out of the caves, to the ship, and get into space.

They managed to grab the last bit of supplies from the caves before moving up through the winding caverns. They had to make it into the ship before dawn, at least they knew that no one would be attacking when the sun was up, but they didn’t know about when it started to go down.

They hurried on board the ship, Karkat performed one last headcount, and they slammed the doors. Sollux rushed to the control panel and started pressing buttons and pulling switches faster than the others could watch his hands move. Equius, without being asked, immediately opened the hatch in the control deck floor to check the engine, his verdict being “Not the best, but at least it won’t explode and kill us all, and I think I can fix it on the move.” He decaptchalogue a toolbox and started checking through it. “Yes, I have everything I need. We should get a head start, I can work on it then.”

“AG, thlide over to the pilot’s theat. I’m going to do an electrical check, you do the thyth check.” Vriska slid over to the seat next to Sollux, and she started to press buttons.

“Systems are warming up, it’ll take them a moment, apparently we didn’t rattle enough dust off this thing. Hey, it’s got radar.”

“Ith it operational?”

“Don’t know yet, it’s booting. All of you better find a seat, once this baby is warmed up we’re outta here.” Vriska added the last bit while waving her hand at the collection of seats on the walls beside them.

“This thing wwasn’t set up for twelve trolls. There are five seats.”

“Seven of us are sitting then, find a lap and hope that the straps will hold the both of you,” Vriska replied.

Equius scooped up Nepeta immediately. Eridan moved towards Feferi, but her glare sent him skittering to the other side of the row of seats. Kanaya sat in Aradia’s lap, wincing and struggling to find a position in which Aradia’s metal leg didn’t dig painfully into her. Karkat looked awkwardly at Gamzee, who shuffled his feet.

“Everyone.” Sollux’s voice was low. “All of you are doubling up. Get over yourthelveth and juth find a lap and hold on. We’re at fifty perthent and the electrical thythtem is stable. AG?”

“Radar’s up if you want to check it out. Waiting for the final bits of a lot of things. I’ll let you know when the engines are good to warm up.”

“Doeth anyone have the time?”

“It’s about four, two hours until dawn,” Kanaya said quickly.

Tavros sighed and extended his arms. “Eridan, come here.”
Eridan sat down in Tavros’ lap, shifting uncomfortably. “Thanks.”

“Please don’t talk to me right now, this is awkward enough.”

Terezi grabbed Feferi’s hand and pulled her over. “Rock-paper-scissors for who sits on who?”

Feferi nodded and moved her hand to play. They counted to three, and both drew their respective choice. “Looks like I’m sitting on you,” Feferi said.

“I don’t see how you’ve won, so it looks like I’m on your lap, Miss Elderberry Fizz.” Terezi cracked a grin.

Feferi shook her head, a small smile on her lips before sitting and pulling Terezi to her. “Fine, fine. I’m probably heavier than you anyway - more muscle.” Both of them shuffled for a moment before locking in the restraints.

Gamzee sighed, grabbing onto Karkat’s forearm. “Let’s go.” He sat down, Karkat sitting on him as gingerly as if Gamzee was a glass statue. He tried not to shift around, and refused to look Gamzee in the eye.

The body contact was uncomfortable, but not as bad as it could have been. Karkat was small and warm, and as unlike Gamzee’s tormentors as it was possible for a troll to be. Gamzee rested a hand on Karkat’s hair and murmured “I’m okay, bro.” He tensed and breathed a little faster as the safety restraints wrapped around them both, but he could handle it, it was only for a short time. And Karkat was there.

Sollux looked back. “Everyone okay, and buckled in?” He looked around. “Theems like it. Engineth have tharted to warm up. AG, can you handle the retht of the protheth?”

“I got it.” Vriska started pulling at a lever and they could hear the engine spring to life, slowly at first, then louder as the seconds wore on.

“We’ve got thome thmall thhipth in the upper atmosphere. I think they are drone thhipth. Let me thee if I can dithengage them before we take off.”

Everyone held their breath, listening to the beeps and clicks as Sollux worked. Gamzee watched, mentally thanking the Messiahs that he hadn’t actually ended up having to fly a ship solo. He should have known the simple controls in movies were hoofbeastshit.

“Everything is loaded - we ready to go, Sollux?”

“Yeah, yeah, we thhouldn’t have any resistance, good to go on my end.”

Vriska barely nodded, before grabbing onto another lever. She pressed a few buttons and readied her hands on another set. “Everyone hold on, this clunker is going to shake up a storm.” All but the two piloting the ship tensed, grabbing on to their seats or the troll they were sitting on. “Here we go.”

There was force as the ship pulled forward, not very fast yet, but the speed was quickly increasing. “We’re at two hundred,” Sollux said quickly. “At four hundred I’ll charge the thruthterth.”

“Hopefully this old son of a bitch speeds up enough before the cliffs.”

“If not, I’m a pthionic, we’ll manage. Getting near two-fifty now.” Pressure was pushing every troll back in their chair. The front part of the ship was starting to tilt upwards. Vriska was uttering a steady
stream of curses and words under her breath. “Three-ten.”

“That cliff is getting awfully close.”

“Hold your pothition, AG.” Vriska nodded, her body pressing back and her hand yanking back on the lever like it might make the ship go faster than it already was. The engine was roaring through the ship, sounding violent and angry; the ship wasn’t shaking yet, but the sudden increase of speed made it impossible to move any of their limbs without a lot of effort.

Vriska moved her arm and the others could see the ability it took to move towards any of the buttons. “Where are we, Sollux?”

“Three-eighty, if you preth that button too thoon it’th going to be a challenge to get into orbit. Hold your courth, I’ll tell you when to preth it.”

“We’re going to go off that cliff vertically. Hopefully we can engage the thrusters and use the angle to help,” Vriska said quickly, before cursing again.

“We have time before it hitth. Three-nine-five, get ready.”

If any of the other trolls watching could have turned their heads they would have seen the approaching cliff. Instead, they were too busy trying to right their sense of balance and keep from breaking anything as they slammed and pressed into each other.

“Four hundred, engage the first thruthter.” Vriska pressed a button, and the ship jumped forward and pulled off the ground, nearly vertical in a matter of seconds as it shot higher into the air. “In three, two, one, engage the thecond.” Another lurch forward and everyone pressed back as the pilot’s window was covered in fire.

The ship shook and groaned as it passed through the atmosphere. The pressure mixed with the shaking was enough to make any of the trolls feel like a carbonated drink, shaken up and waiting to explode. The roar of the exit was nearly deafening on top of the noise from the engine.

“We aligned?” Vriska’s voice was strained over the roar. She was shouting as loud as she possibly could.

“We’re ready!” Sollux was shouting just as loudly. The shaking started to slow, and along with the fire whipping around them it slowed and all that was left was the blackness of space. The ship sounded like it was popping, or that could have just been their ears getting accustomed to the new altitude. “Everything’th thtill working.”

“The clunker made it. You all can unbuckle now, the main turbulence is over. If any of you feel sick, find something other than the ground to vomit on.”

“Okay, how far can we get with the supplies we have?” Karkat said, shaking a little as he unbuckled him and Gamzee. The rest of the trolls followed suit shortly there after, all of them standing with a little shake.

“It’s about... Wwell, this is just a guess-”

“Okay, no. Let’s get a handle on our full situation, before any of us run off to do any other projects.” Karkat paused. “Actually, Equius, start looking at the mechanics, Sollux, do something similar but whatever the fuck your version’s called. Vriska, figure out our navigation and the exact place we’re going. The rest of us, go through the ship, top to bottom, make a list of everything we have. Also write what’s in your sylladex. You have one hour, I’ll be around to get status reports, if you need
more time tell me. This work for everyone?” The group nodded. “Also, if anyone can figure out how
to look where the fleet actually is, that would be awesome.”

“I’m on it, KK, I’ll thee if I can calculate our lead and maybe buy uth more time.”

The trolls slowly moved to do their respective jobs, most sitting with pen and paper, writing down
what was in their sylladex first. Karkat sighed, basics first; ship navigation and threat proximity.
Then he could worry about the rest of the supplies.

There was a squeak, and Karkat noticed Tavros was still hugging Tinkerbull. He sighed; great, an
extra mouth to feed. Still, if worst came to worst the one problem could fix the other... He shook his
head as he watched the little bull nuzzle Nepeta’s hand as Tavros held it out, and decided that would
be the last resort. Having a lusus on board was clearly helping morale, and he didn’t want to lose
that. He sighed and moved over to the hatch where Equius had started to work.

“You looked at this before we left?” Karkat’s voice was still terse, but he was making an effort to at
least sound polite.

“Barely, I did not have the time to extract all the required information.” There was a pause as Equius
decapchalogued a notepad and pencil and started scribbling. “I’m afraid this engine’s efficiency is
terrible. There’s no way we can outpace a good Alternian flyer, even with a head start, but even if
we could, sooner or later we’ll run out of fuel. If we want to make any reasonable amount of speed
or distance we really need a psionic helmsman in a proper rig-”

“No,” Karkat said firmly, raising a hand. “You already did enough damage with your bullshit about
serving in your place, I am not having my best friend wired into a ship forever. Especially some
crappy junker that should have probably been scrapped sweeps ago. I’m glad it’s here, but if my best
friend is becoming the Helmsman of any ship it’s going to be a good one at least. That’s not why we
brought him, he came along to escape that!”

“No, no! I wasn’t suggesting that for a minute!” Equius looked at the engine again. “I was about to
say, if I rewire this a bit, I think - don’t quote me on this, but I think - I can set up a detachable
helmsman wiring system.”

Everyone heard him, and paused what they were doing in surprise.


“I highly doubt it’s impossible, lowb- Captor. It’s just that nobody’s ever bothered to try. Or at least
nobody with our skills.”

“‘Our’ skills, not ‘your’ skills? Huh.” Vriska smirked.

“Well, yes. I’m not a psionic.” Equius brushed his hair behind his ears and scribbled faster. “Okay,
this will be... difficult at best, and I must warn you, Captor, it will probably hurt. But it’s perfectly
possible and you won’t be in it forever.”

“What’s the downside?” Karkat asked.

“Uh, well, I’m going to have to improvise a bit, the equipment isn’t marvellous, and there’s no way
to test it safely before putting it into practice. If it goes wrong, Captor risks brain damage.”

Karkat looked at Sollux, who thought for a moment, then nodded. “Either I rithk brain damage, or
we all thtarve to death or get caught. I’m willing to try it.” He stood up and looked at Equius’
notebook. “... Oh my god, you’re right!”
“The cable array would just be in a helmet. Of course that cuts the amount of power but I don’t think we have to tools to create a functioning removable array. There is also the issue of capturing the power. I was thinking we can go with a set of goggles that you would focus the energy to.”

“It would need thome type of boothter.”

“I was thinking something like...” Equius scribbled into the notebook, Sollux nodding beside him. “... this?”

“It would justt continually thycle the charge, and I’d keep plugging at the initial puthh?”

“That’s what I was thinking, though getting that initial charge would be difficult. It would leave you tired.”

“We can work around that. Ath long ath that’th a known ithue we can prep for it. How are we looking at thtorage?”

“I’m a bit stuck on that at present, but I was thinking continual cable loops. Since you’ll be recharging it, we shouldn’t run into any entropy problems.”

“There would be a big loth ratio, which might outweigh ith uthe. We can work on that though, over time we have to thee if a cableloop would even work to hold a phionic charge... But we can do thith! I’ve never theen anything like- wait.” He looked at Karkat, then at Gamzee, then back at Equius. “KK, am I thtill thuppothed to be mad at thith guy?”

“Gamzee and I still am, but you don’t have to be. I’d recommend you don’t stay mad if you working with him will both save all our lives and give us an excuse not to have to talk to him.”

Equius expressed with a scowl what most people would have expressed with an extended middle finger.
>user40@UP00: ~run; {
ENT = 'FCEMS_2880_01_0000';
if (isServer) then
{
($ gip [opt(setopen), [2201_ajju] [helm];
};
}}

>level TWO clearance required.
>Please insert administrator password

>user40@UP00: ~run; { batch(passwordget.mml);
if(ACTED) then;
{
end[all]
};
}};

>Password accepted
>Welcome admin, please select option below:
>1: MODIFY
>2: EXTRACT
>3: PROGRAM
>4: CONNECT
>5: MORE OPTIONS

>admin: 4

>Loading
>Admin connected to AH-01

>hello?
>ii2 thii2 the helm2man of the battle2hiip conde2cen2iion?

>wh_at c_an ii d_o f_or you?

>ii2ten, ii don't want two hurt you. 2o ii'm going two make thii2 brief. ii'm not an admiin, ii'm a rebel and ii'm tryiing two run from the fleet. you're going two get a me22age two track our 2hiip. ii know you can't outright liie, but iiif you could 2ay we covered our trail and help buy u2 tiime that would be awe2ome.

>ii c annot b etray my p_o2t, the al_arm2 w_iill 2_ound iin 30 2_econd2.

>ii don’t want two hurt you. ii can put you offline, ii know that hurt2 and ii don’t want to hurt 2omethiing- 2omeone that could be me iin another tiime.
>ii r_equiire m_ore iinf_ormatiion on th_e d ata. pl_ea2e expl_aiin f_urther.

>iif ii hadn't run from con2criptiion ii would be a helm2man two. ii don't want two hurt you. ii know that iif thii2 fail2 ii'll become a helm2man iif death doe2n't come fiir2t. ii'm tryiing two conviince you two help out a fellow yellowblood and maybe future helm2man.

>ii und_er2tand th ii2 t_actiic, it w_ill n_ot w_ork. th_e al_arms w_ill 2_ound iin 30 2_econd2 onc_e e m_ore.

>no, no, plea2e. ii 2wear ii’m telling the truth. my name i2 captor.
>2ollux captor. check the record2, ii’m a wanted fugiitiive.
>ii’m wiith the la2t of the 2ufferii2t rebel2. we need your help.

>.
>.
>.

>are you 2tiill there?
>wait what am ii 2ayiing, where el2e would you be? ii2 there a problem?

>ii w_ill 2c_out your tr_ajecotry, on_e m_oment.
>ii c_annot l_ie tw_o h_er, b_ut ii w_ill 2_ay you h_ave tw_o w_ay2 you c_ould b_e g_oiing, and b_oth ar_e g_eneral. you h_ave c_overed your tr_aiil v_ery w_ell, and ii w_ill c_ontinue tw_o w_ork on iiit.
>you w_ill h_ave t_o d_elete th ii2 l_og, ii und_er2tand th_at. ii d_o n_ot m_iind, l_ittle c_aptor.

>thank2 for thii2, ii know it’2 ri2kiing your liife.

>ii w_ould n_ot m_iind d_eath, b_ut 2h_e w_ould n_ot gr_ant iiit. 2h_e only g_iive2 tr_oll2 ext_ended l_iife 2_o m_ake th_em 2_uffer m_or2. l_iitle 2_ollux, b_e aw_are 2h_e w_ill h_unt you d_own.

>ii know, we’re tryiing two make iit a2 diifficult to fiind u2 a2 po22iible.

>ii2 iimp_922ii6le t_o h_ide f_orever.

>then we’ll flight to the very end. thank2 agaiin, ii’ll delete thii2 log now, 2ave you 2ome griief.

>th_ere ii2 on_e f_avour ii a2k iiin r_eturn f_or my a22_iis2ance.

>what?

>d_on’t g_et c_auught al_iive.
>ii c_an’t f_ace th_at ag_aiin.

>under2tood. thank you agaiin. ii have to go now, but ii mean iit. thank you.

>admin: input:returntotop

>Welcome admin, please select option below:
>1:MODIFY
>2: EXTRACT
>3: PROGRAM
>4: CONNECT
>5: MORE OPTIONS
modify codes accessed

1: NAVIGATION
2: INSTANCES
3: CONNECTIVITY
4: RESET
5: RESTRICTIONS
6: LOGS

logs are listed from most recent to oldest.
please select log to continue

select [001-13-12-2-2-90]

log selected.
OPTIONS:
1: READ
2: SEND
3: SEARCH

MORE OPTIONS:
1: CHANGE LOG
2: OVERRIDE
3: DELETE
4: LESS OPTIONS

level ONE clearance required please enter password.
>Log will be permanently deleted, do you want to continue y/n?

admin: 2orry

>Unknown command
>Log will be permanently deleted, do you want to continue y/n?

admin: y

>Log is being purged, one moment.
>purging
>purging
>logs are listed from most recent to oldest.
>please select log to continue.
Chapter 12

Preosh Filona shifted uncomfortably under the eyes of the subjugglators, and tried to subtly move closer to her group’s mentor. The other five trolls in her squad - it would have been six, but Eridan Ampora was missing - looked equally uncomfortable, and the blueblood squad beside them looked even more frightened, with the exception of their mentor. He was strutting along as happily as if he was aboard his own ship, a merry twinkle in his eye even as the subjugglators eyed him like a fresh cut of meat. Preosh platonically hated him on sight. She looked away from him, and wished she hadn’t as her eyes caught a large patch of a colour very similar to her own blood on the wall.

The two sets of nervous trolls finally reached the foot of the Grand Highblood’s throne. The enormous troll towered over even the tallest blueblood, and his fangs glimmered like a shark’s. Preosh and her squad hadn’t been fully debriefed on why they were being called to the Subjugglator flagship, or why their particular squad had been called. They were a bunch of trainees, there were plenty of other trolls who could have been called, ones with experience. Though she wasn’t about to question the Grand Highblood about his methods. She didn’t feel like becoming a stain on the wall.

Both groups came to a halt, waited to be told just why they were there. Instead, the Highblood just sat, his hands hooked on the armrests of his throne, simply smiling at them. The only thing giving away that he wasn’t some terrifyingly huge doll was the fact his eyes did flash over each of their faces, and the movement from his chest as he breathed.

Preosh desperately wanted to take a step back, but she could feel the stares of dozens of subjugglators behind her and felt like she’d be stepping back into the mouth of a kraken. Even the annoyingly happy blueblood was starting to look tense.

The room was thick with silence and heavy with tension. Preosh swallowed and it sounded loud in her ears. She wanted someone to say something, or for this to get underway somehow. Just standing there in silence waiting for the subjugglators to do something was going to eat right through her protein chute. She glanced over to the group of bluebloods; they didn’t seem much older than her group now that she looked. That made her nerves flare. What could they want with a bunch of recruits?

After far too long, the Highblood leaned forward. She swore she could smell blood on his breath from where she stood. He looked them over, and finally spoke.

“Now, I’m sure you’re wondering what’s going on. You are here because, until fairly recently, you had traitors in your midst. Now, calm down, I know you weren’t aware. But each of your squads has had a member go missing recently, am I correct?”

“Yes... sir,” the blueblood’s mentor said. It was obvious that he wasn’t too sure how one actually referred to the Highblood when speaking to him. “We did have a recruit who vanished one morning...”

Preosh blinked at the wall. Eridan had left, just vanished. The investigation for his thieving was halfway through, when they all woke up one dusk and he was gone. He had never come back; they had assumed he ran from the allegations because they were true and he was trying to save his life. Had he really been a traitor, part of the rebel group behind the Heiress?

She had never heard Eridan say anything about them, which she guessed made sense. But not even something that would slightly link him to them, and she had seen Eridan plenty of times in private. They had been close, she thought, he might have slipped something or any sort of hint to her.
Unless the bastard hadn’t really cared, and was going to just leave one day when their relationship was founded. Of course, that could have explained his comments, trying to break it off because he knew that he would be leaving soon.

“A blueblood by the name of Equius Zahhak.” The Highblood chuckled saying the name. It was a joke only he understood. “And a violetblood named Eridan Ampora.” Somehow hearing Eridan’s name in this context tore her between anger and sickness. She had trusted him, she had even pitied him. She had pitied a traitor.

“That shitbag?” she shouted, before she even realised she was speaking. The word bounced off the walls, mixing with the gasp of her mentor, who brought a hand to his mouth and winced.

The Highblood looked at her, raising an eyebrow. “Am I to assume you have information?”

Preosh stared up at him, mouth moving silently, before she forced herself to talk. “Uh. Yes, I was... quite close to him at one point.”

“In what way?” The Highblood saw her expression and his lips twitched in a faint smirk. “Bad breakup?”

“... Yes, okay?” Preosh sighed. Her squad already knew, there was no point in her being shy about it.

“Well, do tell,” the Highblood said, sitting back on his throne. Preosh looked up at him and wondered if he seriously wanted to hear about the details of her breakup or if he wanted her information. Choosing incorrectly at this impasse could mean her death. She swallowed, trying to buy herself some time, but even waiting too long could get her killed.

“He and I...” She decided by his tone that he did want details of their relationship to the point of the break up. “We became friends shortly after conscription, one thing led to another, and eventually we decided to enter into a relationship. He never said anything about... the rebellion to me. Nothing ever slipped out of his mouth about it. It was going pretty normal, until I realized he was an insensitive hypocritical jerk, and we broke up. He was being investigated for theft, and then he vanished. We didn’t talk much after our relationship dissolved.”

The Highblood arched a brow, a small smile on his lips. “Is that all you’d like to say on the matter?” Judging by his tone, that wasn’t all she should say on the matter, but she really didn’t know what else to add unless she wanted to talk about the thick of their relationship and break up.

She sighed. She’d rather lose her dignity than her life. “Okay, if you really want to know, he pailed half the ship and then had the nerve to call me loose.”

Preosh’s mentor, Icatus Gritch, looked shocked. “Wait, was that why he looked so tired all the time?” Preosh would have rolled her eyes, had she been in the presence of any troll but the Grand Highblood. She decided not to risk it.

“Oh, yez?” Gartel Ravety broke in, shaking her head. “He told me he could get you to let him zuck you off for a better grade. I did tell him we was being too subtle.” Lieutenant Gritch dropped his glasses. Gartel sighed. “I don’t know what you’re complaining about, Filona, you were fucking special - he didn’t zteal your ztuff and he bothered to remember your name! God, I hate the little whore. Platonically, I mean, zourzpade,” she added, looking at Preosh.

“Technically, whores have to be paid,” the blueblood teacher butted in, grinning. “If he didn’t actually succeed in getting a better grade, that would just make him a slut.” He glanced backwards at
his own shocked students. “Don’t you lot get any ideas. That offer’s not open to my ugly students, you know.”

Preosh half expected either herself or the blueblood to get a club through the head, but the Highblood actually let loose a quiet chuckle. The blueblood winked at her. Evidently he’d dealt with subjugglators before, if clearly not the Highblood himself.

“Did you not know his proclivities before you dated him? Or were you unafraid of his... to put bluntly, what he might be carrying?” The Highblood was obviously amused by her losing any dignity she had. “Actually, given he fucked half the ship, I’m sure you are your team are closer thanks to him.”

Her group looked at her nervously, apparently not too happy with her. She had drawn attention to their group, but honestly he seemed in good humor about it, even if he just did accuse all of them of having a shared disease thanks to their once-teammate.

“I pitied him because everyone fucked him, but nobody liked him.” Preosh looked at her feet. “I was a fool.” She looked back up when she realised she’d broken eye contact, afraid that the Highblood had somehow moved in the split-second and was now close enough to snap her neck. “I hope you catch the little bucketdrinker soon, I’d love to see him on a flogging jut.”

The Highblood kept his eyes locked with hers and smiled. She suspected it was what he took for charming, but it was more frightening than anything. “We do intend to catch him, and perhaps we can leave some of his flogging for you. Dependant of course on your assistance. Now we know a little more about Ampora, did any of you know Zahhak?”

“Yeah, I remember him,” the blueblood mentor said. “I thought he was creepy at first, but he was actually really fun to mess with.”

“‘Mess with’ in what way?”

“He took the hemospectrum to a new extreme. I suspect, now that I know his leanings, he was trying to cover his flagrant disregard of it. But he would get so upset if I didn’t offer criticism or fault him for mistakes. Instead I was kind and offered him support.” He smirked. “One time I complimented him after he’d broken something, while I was holding a stick. I’ve never seen anyone so disappointed to not get hit. He seemed ready to break things for that kind of attention. It was funny to say the least.”

“Your name is Harkol, yes? Shuran Harkol?” The Highblood smiled. “Well, you’re a troll after my own heart. I’ll keep your name in mind. There are very few things in the world that are more rewarding than watching a youngling squirm. I know most of you are young, but I’m sure you will learn in time how funny that sort of action is.”

The blueblood looked as if he had something to add, but he was debating with himself. “Equius was strong though, more than any other blueblood I have ever met. Quite skilled with delicate work when he put his mind to it, but also very strong. It worked against him sometimes - if he got carried away he’d break the bows, and once I surprised him while he was trying to drink and there was broken glass all over the place. I didn’t do that again, I can tell you.” He rubbed at a recently-scarred nick in his ear.

“I would expect so. You are too young to know the name Zahhak, but I do. Being strong is their forte, though obviously their bonds to the Empire are always weak. If I had known what names were showing up at this conscription I personally would have gone down there and slaughtered a fair share of them. As ancestor, so descendant.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, and the trolls before
him had time to hope the meeting was over before he leaned forward again.

“Now, the Empress promised a reward to anyone who brought forth useful information,” the Highblood said, steepling his fingers and gazing at the group over them. Preosh braced herself for their “reward” being a swift death, and was totally unprepared when he continued with “You’re all promoted.”


“Yes, really. I can see there’s no love lost between any of you and your former associates, so I’m assigning you to the special forces we’re sending to bring them back.”

Preosh’s flail was in her hand before anyone could blink. She clutched it to her chest like a beloved pet and ran a finger along one of its two razor-sharp hooks. “Really? I get to drag Ampora back in chains?”

The Highblood smiled, “Quite a little firecracker aren’t you? To answer your question, yes, you’ll get to drag him back. We prefer alive to dead, for the record. This mission is my pet project.” Harkol nodded in understanding; every troll in the empire had heard the news. “Getting them in chains is the Empire’s first task before they can destroy any other colonies, or collect any allies other than the ones we already suspect they have. You’ll be fully debriefed once your promotions are finalized. Of course the mission you are going on is more related to shadows and relative silence. It wouldn’t serve any of you to spread the information you learn with your new position. We know who has the information and they will not be around long enough to endanger the sanctity of this Empire. Is that understood?”

The trolls around the room nodded. The threat was more than obvious, and none of them particularly wanted to meet their end via the subjugglator forces. The Highblood leaned back once more gripping onto his throne.

“Well, with that out of the way, you’re dismissed. Gather what you consider important - you have some training you’ll need, so prepare for it. You’ll receive a message once you’re ready to begin and everything is finalized. Which will be very soon, so make sure you are ready to go at a moment’s notice. I am not known for my patient nature.” The group nodded again. The Highblood raised a hand and the crowd of subjugglators behind them split apart, allowing them to exit.

Preosh was practically skipping as the two groups left and went their separate ways. She had got out of a meeting with the Grand Highblood not only alive, but promoted. This had been the best day of her life, but she expected it to take second place fairly soon, on the day she finally saw Eridan again. This time with a weapon in her hand.
“What the hell are you two doing?” Karkat gaped at Vriska and Eridan, who were covered up to the elbows in red paint.

“Well, if you claim a ship you have to give it a new name! Not doing that is a terrible omen, and we already seem to be having just about aaaaaaaaall the bad luck. So we found some paint someone left lying around and got to it.”

“Of course that wwould hawe wworked better if wwe could hawe agreed wwhose ancestor to name it after.” Eridan shrugged. “So wwe compromised.”

Karkat looked at the name painted on the corridor wall; Naelenurenna. “‘Mindscar’? Seriously? Sounds like how my thinkpan feels after listening to the two of you.”

“Wwwell, wwe figured it wwas better than Dualfang.”

“Not by much, admittedly, but it’ll do.”

“Isn’t the ship’s name traditionally painted on the outside? Maybe you two should go climb out the airlock and paint it there.”

“Oh, ha ha ha die.”

Karkat shook his head. “I actually came to find all the slackers, because obviously you forgot we had a meeting today. The one I harped about last night, how everyone needs to be there. It wasn’t optional.”

“We had a meeting today?”

“Well, I’d like to know where the fuck we’re going, and maybe figure out what we’re going to do in the long term. As much as I like floating around in a tin can with limited supplies—”

“Yeah, yeah, we got it. It was ju- no never mind. Fine, let’s go, fearless leader.”

The three of them started to walk towards the bridge. The ship shuddered, pushing them forward slightly, and all of them had to grab on to the wall as not to fall. Karkat looked back to the other two trolls following him.

“We could have passed through something,” Vriska said, without Karkat having to ask the question. “It seems like it’s over now, must have just been a hiccup. The ship’s not coming apart.”

The three of them resumed walking, moving back to the flight deck, the only room large enough to house all of them comfortably for an extended period of time. Karkat seriously hoped everyone was already there, because if he had to hunt everyone down he was going to strangle someone. They made it to the door separating them from the flight deck, and inside they could hear a commotion. Karkat was almost happy that most of them gathered without him having to hunt them down. He knew Equius and Sollux would have been there anyway, still working on the engine. Karkat slid the door open, and it took him a long moment to comprehend the scene.

Anyone could have felt the warmth in the room, and the crackling of psionics could now be heard. Sollux was already wearing the helmet, gripping it tightly between both white-knuckled hands. Still-exposed wires were shaking from the power he was pushing into them. Karkat stared for a long
moment, before he nearly screamed. They had promised the whole team would be present for its first use, just in case something wrong happened. Karkat marched forward, intent on ripping the helmet off his best friend and putting it on Equius’ head, and on figuring out how to reverse the stored psionic flow.

“Stop!” Equius held up a hand in warning. His face was almost white, runnels of blueish sweat trickling down his neck and arms and soaking his undershirt. “If you touch it now I don’t know what will happen. This is risky enough, pushing it off-balance could kill him and possibly everyone else here.”

Karkat stopped, but drew himself up as much as he could. Even with his post-pupation height he would never be taller than Equius. “You said you were going to wait until all of us were present to use this thing. “

“Captor was quite adamant on testing it before using it. The test is almost complete, there are just a few more figures we need.”

“I don’t care!” Karkat was shaking. “Sollux, stop… Please, just, don’t do this.”

“It’s almost done, and he said he won’t unplug until the tests are finished.” Equius was obviously uncomfortable with having to deliver the news. “Just a few more seconds.”

The ship shook slightly, and Sollux’s hands tensed on the helmet. The loose wires connecting him to the ship were shaking on the ground. The light in the room had a faint tint of red and blue before, but now it was obvious.

The light faded, Sollux’s hands shaking, and he fell to the ground, his knees and palms hitting the metal floor with a thud. Other than Sollux’s ragged breaths the room was silent, waiting for some affirmation that it worked, or it hadn’t. If it didn’t work, and something bad had happened, Karkat wasn’t too sure what he was going to do.

Sollux made a noise, something between a groan and a sob. His voice sounded odd, and Karkat moved forward, coming to rest in front of his best friend, knowing that they did have all the shitty luck the universe had stored.

The rest of the trolls had arrived and were staring. All of them understood what had happened. There was some commotion as both Feferi and Aradia fought to the front of the crowd.

“Sollux?” Karkat asked softly, bringing his hands up to the helmet. “Sollux, are you okay?”

The yellowblooded troll didn’t respond. He lifted his hands and grabbed at the air. Karkat felt his stomach drop. Sollux tried moving more, but his balance was tenuous at best. He swayed and once again found himself on his hands and knees.

Karkat put his hands on either side of the helmet. Feferi and Aradia had made it to his side, both of them coming to kneel beside Karkat. Equius didn’t say that the helmet shouldn’t be removed, or give Karkat any more warnings. Karkat pulled it off slowly. Sollux’s eyes were closed, he was still breathing hard. There wasn’t any blood, but he could have just cooked his thinkpan. They didn’t see any traces of psionic scars, though that could have been explained by the same cooking of his thinkpan that Karkat unwillingly focused on.

“Sollux?”

Sollux’s face twitched, and he made another noise. He tried pulling back to his knees, instead he swayed and both Aradia and Feferi grabbed him and helped him with his balance. Now he was
upright there was blood, a little bit slid down from his nose.

Karkat turned to Equius. The blueblood looked shocked. He was holding on to his notebook and pencil like it was going to save him from the very painful process of dealing with Karkat’s temper. Sollux swallowed, his eyes opening slowly. His eyes hadn’t changed their color; they looked a little glassy, but other than that they were normal. Slowly, he raised a hand, Feferi still holding onto his side.

“Did…” his voice was slurred but normal, “we get the charge, EQ?” He wiped the blood away, smirking the smallest amount.

“I am almost positive we did.”

“Exthellent.” Sollux tried to smile, but he apparently was still shaken from the experiment. “No obviouth brain damage… I think we managed to make a detachable Helmthman rig from withful thinking and thpare parth.”

“Sollux,” Aradia said softly. “Don’t do that again.”

“No fear,” Sollux groaned, a dreamy grin spreading over his face. “When the adrenaline wearth off, thith ith really going to fucking hurt. Heheh, but we did it. Pair of wrigglerth with a pile of junk did the impothible.”

Karkat blinked, and slowly a smile spread over his face. “It worked. I can’t believe it, you actually got it to work.” He laughed, and grabbed Sollux’s hand and shook it. “You’re a genius!” He looked at Equius, shrugged, and said “And yeah, okay, so are you. Huh. We may actually have a chance at escaping now.”

The trolls gathered round Sollux and Equius, shaking their hands and patting their backs, Tinkerbull fluttering happily around their heads as he picked up the trolls’ excitement. Even Gamzee gave them both a brief nod; it was hard for him to be angry at Equius just after he’d potentially saved the entire gang from death or worse. His good mood probably wouldn’t last, but he decided to enjoy it while it did.

Once everyone had given their congratulations, Sollux got up and he and Equius looked over the numbers Equius had obviously been gathering while Sollux had been plugged in. The rest of the trolls slowly settled into their regular places around the bridge. Karkat cleared his throat, and Equius and Sollux broke their conversation, both of them taking their seats on makeshift piles they had been cobbling together. Karkat looked over the group. “I know we already told them how awesome they are, but for good measure, Equius and Sollux did well. Now we have a stronger chance of outrunning the Empire. We might just get a pretty good lead now. But outrunning the empire is the point of this meeting.” Karkat looked over everyone again, then shrugged. He didn’t have to be the figurehead of a cult with his friends, just Karkat. “So does anyone have a plan for where we’re going, or are we just going to float around in this stupid tub until we get caught or starve to death? Because if it’s just floating around until death we might as well just kill ourselves now by having you fly this thing into a sun.”

“No, we do have a plan,” Sollux said, looking up from his seat. “We were kind of thtuck until EQ helped me with the engine - we can make about twithe the ditthanthe we originally were going to manage before we run out of food, maybe further with thtrategic ute of wormholeth. And of courthe that’th ekthpanded our optioth. I hacked the Empire’th recordth for info about planetth with chemically-compatible life, and we found thith…” Sollux reached over and tapped a button on the control panel. The screen lit up, showing a blue-green ball. Sollux clicked another and the image was projected onto the wall so all the trolls could look at it.
Vriska nodded proudly. “Yep, ladies and gentlemen, we give you… uh…” She squinted at the name under it. “Ee-are-th? Ah, who gives a fuck what it’s called, we’re going there.”

“A few drones checked it out, but it’s kind of a utheleth planet for the Empire’s purpotheth, tho it got put on the backburner invathion-withe. We can jutht about make it there on time, if it cometh to it we can pick up more food and water there and run again.”

All of the trolls were looking over the display. Terezi stood up, and Vriska stopped her. “It’s blue, green, and white,” she said quickly. “Don’t lick the wall until the presentation is over.”

Terezi sniffed instead. “So what’s this planet like?”

“There’s not much hard information on it. There are a few pictures of the surface and the inhabitants, we have files on the most widespread language, and that’s about it. Looks fairly safe to regroup there, though.”

“That’s not on the backburner, that’s on a warming plate somewhere across the uniwerse. Do we know anything else?” Eridan looked over the data on screen.

Vriska cleared her throat. “There is one sentient species, their language looks confusing, though judging by surface pictures they are pretty advanced. Like Alternia before the Rebellion of the Young. Both Sollux and I are pretty sure they have space travel, but they stay close to their planet. No doubt they don’t want to enter into planetary war. Their planet is pretty much useless to us, but I’m sure other Empires would try. They use weird things to build with, they seem to dislike a lot of open space between their groups, only some of their species seems to like being away from others. But, most importantly, it’s habitable for us, we’re pretty sure we can eat and drink just about anything there.”

“Really, we know next to nothing about this planet. How long ago was this data taken?”

“Not long enough that the star blew up and the planet isn’t there anymore. For all we know the sentient species has moved off planet and it’s an empty rock with food and water. As long as we are willing to hunt. Which is sort of a no duh. I don’t think another Empire would take it either. It’s too close to Alternia’s borders. It would be a direct threat at the Empire and I’m pretty sure no one wants another empire war.”

“Even if they’re thrill there, they look pretty harmleth.” Sollux shrugged. “They’re short of thatithy-looking pink and brown creatureth. I think we could handle them.”

“It sounds like the drones that looked into this planet did a terrible job. Usually there is more information. Either that or they’re less harmless than they look and the drones got destroyed,” Karkat added, looking concerned.

“Look at it ath a good thing.” Sollux smiled. “With the droneth, GZ thayth that they’ll be thearching the Empire for uth. Thith ith removed, but not unknown. Even if they are dangerous, we can keep our headth about where we are, treat it ath a rethtock mithion if we notice that we don’t thtand a chanthe.”

“It isn’t like Sollux and me just pointed and picked a planet, guys.” Vriska shook her head. “We researched, and looked over a lot of planets for us to come up with a few we thought were good candidates. This one happens to be the best.”

“Let me guess, it’s the one you picked.‘ Terezi would have been rolling her eyes if it could have been seen.
“Of course. But seriously, it’s our best option.”

“AG ith right, it ith. Thince I know we all have handhelds I’m going to thend over the language information. All of uth are required to learn it. When we arrive if we run into the owner thpecieth, all of uth can communicate with them. Hopefully, they don’t have any short of kill on thight laws. I’ll see if I can rig up our chipth to help uth learn it father, we have thome time but we need to be competent, thay we come in peace, and hope they haven’t heard about Alternia.”

“Maybe it’s best,” Aradia said, “to be prepared for if we meet them, but use this as a restock. Then we can head out to some far off planet that isn’t owned, or near anyone. If we do get in contact with the dominant species there and they turn out to not be volatile we can, at that point, see about setting up something to finish training. I know all of us know we can’t outrun them forever.”

“We only have until my pupation,” Feferi said softly. “Unless I kill myself right before. Either that or all of you die.”

“It won’t come to pass,” Karkat said quickly. “We can’t outrun them forever, but we can find a better way to face them. Then we can take them down.”

“How long do we have left before the next one of us pupates? Excuse the question,” Terezi asked, trying to conceal nervousness.

“You’re excused, Pyrope. We have enough time, I can keep myself in check, but only for so long. We would arrive there and could have taken off again with more food and water by the time that happens. Although I would request that if we are doing it as a stock run, I would be excluded from gathering the stock. I would like to make some repairs, and I might be able to scavenge enough materials to make this ship far more comfortable. I found this has a very dated water-recycling system - it’s usable now, but it’s not in good condition. Most of this ship is that way. I can maintain it, but it needs work. Luckily, we shouldn’t run into any problems with the pressure or atmosphere systems.”

“It would make sense if we divided up jobs when we got there. It would save us time, and energy. Some for food, some for water, some for ship and ship repairs, others for other items. We split evenly into teams of three, so we can break that way when we get there.” Karkat was thinking out loud, but the other trolls nodded. “So we go to E-har-eth and we have a back-up plan just in case it’s not safe. If it is what should we do? If they welcome us and give us asylum, we would be putting their planet at risk.”

“Maybe we should cross that bridge when we come to it,” Kanaya said. “How long is it going to take to get there? I’m sure we have time to work it out.”

“I’m till fully plotting our courthe, it could take two perigeeth, it could take three. Dependth on how we can uthe thpace to thuit our needth. I’ll give a better anthwer later. Right now we’re on the part of the trip that would be the thame no matter what. I might have AG take over tho I can thee if I can find out how far the Empire ith behind uth.”

“I can do that, no problem.”

“Save it for after we all sleep, we haven’t done much of it since we took off from Alternia, and none of us are going to be any use exhausted. We cannot afford even the smallest mistakes - think of it this way, every error we make is one step closer to the Empire making an example of us… Or for other threats to happen.” Karkat said the last bit fast, not wanting to think on it long, but wanting to remind everyone what they knew would come if they failed. “Everyone, let’s eat, then sleep. In the evening we’ll plot the course and do our odd jobs. Is that alright with everyone?”
Everyone agreed and set to their respective tasks, Terezi volunteering to try and make something edible from their limited supplies. A hot meal on top of Sollux’ and Equius’ success raised their spirits significantly, even knowing about their lack of sopor slime; only two recuperacoons had been salvaged from the hideout. Karkat forbade anyone from sleeping in them, in order to preserve the slime supply. Everyone would have to smear a little of it on their temples and hope that would be enough to keep nightmares at bay. Gamzee faced it without complaining; even that limited amount of slime was better than what he had become used to. All of them curled up in the flight deck, not at ease enough to take up the bunkblocks, taking whatever they could call comfortable and creating something to sleep on. It took too long for all of them to relax long enough to sleep, but leader’s orders were leader’s orders.

Eridan was unsure how long he had been asleep. Waking up happened suddenly; barely conscious and bleary eyed, he could feel someone stroking from his hairline to his jaw. He looked over to see the culprit, and froze. “Gam, wwhat are you doin’?”

“Nothing, just thinking.” Gamzee’s eyes were half-hidden by his hair, his lips curved in a wicked smile.

“Gam, I… Could you stop?”

“WHY?” The yell was more like a hoarse growl. “If we just chopped those pesky fins, YOU’D BE REAL MOTHERFUCKING BEAUTIFUL.”

Eridan shrank away. “Uh. I see your teeth are growwin’ back. Um. Good?”

Karkat lay not far away, peeking through his eyelashes and smirking. He hissed quietly “Hey, anyone wanna bet on whether Ampora wets himself?”

“Sure, what’s the price?” Vriska sniggered behind her hands.

“Gam… wwhat brought, I mean, wwould you…” Eridan was stuttering, trying to find something to say or some way to make the action stop. Gamzee was nearly on top of him, still running his fingers across skin. There was an even more twisted smile on his face now, amplified by the fact that some of the staples that had been holding his cheeks together had pushed out from their place as the wound was healing.

“Oh hush, no need to get all up and nervous, you were something I could be occupying my time with. I ain’t needing no sleep. Don’t worry, I ain’t gonna be messing with your fins just yet. We got ourselves plenty of time.”

Kanaya, keeping an eye on Gamzee, whispered to Karkat “Shouldn’t you be stopping him?”

“Relax,” Karkat said, leaning towards Kanaya, watching Eridan still stuttering at Gamzee. “He told me he really isn’t going to do it, he just wants to scare them a little bit. I don’t honestly blame him. He could do worse, he just wants revenge and this doesn’t kill them. But if he does start actually acting on those threats, then yeah, I’ll stop him. This is just light revenge.”

“That’s sick.”

“They had their chance to help him and they didn’t. He needs to work out the stress somehow and this is probably better than dismembering them.”

“Karkat!” Kanaya’s whisper was more of a sigh. “He needs to vent his frustrations in a healthier manner.”
“If it was a few sweeps later and he’d stopped being so angry already I’d agree with you. He’s pretty pissed off, and I don’t blame him. No offense, Kanaya, but you haven’t heard him talk about what happened. Anyway, what do you think he should do? I’m open to suggestions.”

“Has he discussed what happened with you?” Kanaya said, avoiding the second part of the statement; she wasn’t too sure how Gamzee should be working through his problems, but she firmly believed this wasn’t the way to do so.

“Not all of it, but he told me a few things. I don’t really want to ask for any more details. What I heard is enough to make me sick.”

Eridan was trying to move away from Gamzee, but their positions made it difficult. Karkat glanced over to make sure nothing had escalated. There wasn’t any blood, there wasn’t anything other than Gamzee’s twisted features looking down at Eridan, and the violetblooded troll trying to escape.

“Would you put Eridan through something similar, then?” Kanaya asked tersely.

“No! As I said, Gamzee’s not actually going to do it. He’s just letting them feel something of what their advice was like. It’s a sort of cause-and-effect relationship.”

Kanaya was about to say something else, but Eridan drowned her out with a scream, leapt to his feet, and bolted. The sound of a slamming door woke up everyone who hadn’t been woken by his shout, and all eyes turned to Gamzee, who looked conspicuously innocent.

Karkat looked at Kanaya and sighed. “Fine, I’ll tell him to behave himself. I’ll ask him to stop threatening either of them with that.” Karkat cleared his throat. “Gamzee, come here, stop harassing them. You should at least try to get some sleep.”

Gamzee silently lay beside Karkat, not touching him. Karkat soon fell asleep, as did everyone else, one by one. Gamzee did not.
Two days into their journey, Equius managed to get the water system working, much to everyone’s relief; it felt like forever since any of them had been able to take a shower. When it came to his turn, Gamzee had mixed feelings. He desperately wanted to feel clean again, but he wasn’t looking forward to having to see himself.

River water hadn’t done much in way of getting him clean. It got off the loose grime, but not what was caked under the stolen uniform he wore. Most of that had been cleaned off when he had been passed out due to blood loss; still, it felt as if it was there, and there was some black still lingering on his skin.

He held a towel in his hands, wondering if he could somehow cover the mirror embedded into the wall. He knew it wouldn’t work, so instead he settled on closing his eyes as he stripped off his uniform, blindly dropping the pieces of fabric on the counter that held the sink. After he washed up, he wasn’t going to wear the whole thing anymore. There wasn’t a point.

He got into the shower, the hot water feeling like something new. Something he hadn’t quite felt before. Though he was sure it wasn’t meant to be grey when it ran down the drain. He guessed most of the grime had been from his hair, but he wouldn’t have been surprised if he still had layers of it on his skin where he hadn’t had wounds.

He did his best to avoid looking at himself. Instead, he watched the water swirling down the drain. In the gray, there were still purple and pink colored flecks and he could feel his stomach lurch unpleasantly. Now that he wasn’t delusional and elated just to be free, the colors brought everything back. He leaned against the wall; he knew he’d have to scrub at his skin, his hair, he was going to have to face the damage.

It was odd his knees were still bruised. Apparently, his recovery from the cuts along his face hadn’t given the bruises time to fully heal. Looking over his skin, he could see his bones. He’d never been able to do that before. He poked at his hipbone, surprised at its existence, then up to his ribs - those hurt when he poked them. No doubt they were still bruised as well, they had almost been crushed too many times not to be.

He avoided the still-slight scabs of his brands, preferring to forget their existence, but everything seemed to be healing. He didn’t know if he should mentally thank them for the cuts along his cheeks; he was sure that was the only way he could have gotten any care for the injuries they gave him. He should probably thank the poor sap of a medtech that cared for him, he ended up dead for all the work he put into Gamzee. No doubt it was hours of work to clean up all the injuries he had.

He took a breath and quickly scrubbed himself down; the water would be recycled, and cleaned. He didn’t have much time before the water turned off automatically, not that he wanted to spend more time than necessarily naked and vulnerable. He’d get the grime off, get clothes back on, and he could forget that there was a troll underneath them.

He looked at his claws. They’d grown back at least some of the way, and the tips were getting sharp again. Maybe that could solve at least one problem... He rested the tip of his index claw at the edge of the brand on his stomach, and prepared to cut it out.

“Gamzee?” He heard Karkat’s voice, and a knock at the door. “Are you okay in there?”

Gamzee jumped back in the shower, his hands quickly gripping the wall, as if Karkat could see
through the metal and everything else separating them. He tried to find his voice fast enough that it didn’t seem suspicious. Instead he stared toward where the door was, his eyes wide. He damned himself for freezing. He wanted to react, but instead he was left with the noise of the door opening.

“You’re not dead, right? Gamzee?” There was a pause, and his voice caught in his throat. He cast his eyes around the shower stall, quickly looking for anything to cover him up. He was sure Karkat was still speaking, but he was more concerned that his moirail would see him. “--Oh fuck.”

Gamzee tried to grab on to the divider, but his hand slipped against the foggy surface, sliding along the door, exposing even more of himself. He reeled back, trying to hide himself from Karkat’s eyes. He curled his arm around his stomach, trying to hide most of the marks, bruises, and bones.

“What the--” Karkat said slowly. His words cut off as his eyes moved over Gamzee’s form. Gamzee tried to stay curled up and hidden. He didn’t have enough arms or hands to cover everything. Karkat’s eyes widened, and he just knew a shit storm had just brewed itself and was about to make landfall.

“It’s okay,” Gamzee babbled, forcing a smile. “I was just gonna get rid of them, you don’t ever have to see them again!”

“Get rid of--” Karkat cut off his sentence with a yell of “No!” when he saw Gamzee’s claw dig into skin again. He dived forward and wrenched Gamzee’s wrist up, away from the injury. “Gamzee, no! Are you trying to make yourself bleed to death now?”

“No, this isn’t me trying to kill myself.” Gamzee tore his arm away from Karkat’s grip. “I have to get them off me. I can’t keep them there.” His claws once again plunged into the wound he had started.

“Gamzee, stop!”

“I can’t motherfucking stop. I have to get rid of them.” Karkat swore he heard the purpleblooded troll’s voice crack, like he was going to cry, or it could have been to laugh. Either way, it didn’t make Karkat comfortable. Gamzee wasn’t supposed to cry, ever, nor was he supposed to laugh right now. “I need to get them off of me.”

Karkat needed all his strength to hold Gamzee’s hands still. His eyes roved over the marks, taking them in. Muvetir. Hashaan. Ketsk. Jisituni-Rorut. It felt like someone had stabbed a spear into his gut and twisted. He couldn’t pull Gamzee’s hand away from his forearm, and the only part of the word he could make out was “ha”.

“Gamzee, pull your hand away.” Karkat tried to keep his voice steady. “We can figure out another way to get rid of them. Maybe once we restock we can cut into them, so that way they don’t say anything anymore.”

“No,” Gamzee tugged his hand toward his arm. “I can’t, I need to get them off me.”

Karkat could feel the muscles in the taller troll’s arm tense as his claws pushed into skin. He took a breath, trying to ignore the fact his moirail could legitimately kill himself right now. Karkat had to stay strong. He had to keep a level head. “Gamzee, come on, it’s okay.”

“DOES THIS LOOK MOTHERFUCKING OKAY? Does this look like it’s even in the realm of okay.”

Gamzee ripped his arms from Karkat’s grasp, and Karkat could make out the final word Gamzee had branded onto his skin. As strong as Karkat was trying to be, he couldn’t help wanting to back up and give Gamzee space. He knew that was stupid. His claws were growing back fast and if Karkat was
too far away he might have to watch someone he pitied slit their throat. Gamzee gave a little laugh. It wasn’t in humor, just darkness and a torrent of emotion that Karkat wasn’t sure he had the thought-power to scale right now. Not with so much at hand, and at stake.

The taller troll shifted, and Karkat almost moved to stop him again; instead Gamzee turned and showed Karkat his back. He could see another word scrawled between his shoulderblades, and the faintest trace of two signs carved into the back of his neck, hidden by hair. A wave of nausea rolled over the smaller troll. Karkat reached forward and curled his hand around Gamzee’s wrist. Not just to keep him from violence, but he felt like it was all he could do to offer support.

“What does the one on my back say? I couldn’t see it and they didn’t tell me.”

Karkat swallowed.

“What does it MOTHERFUCKING SAY?”

Karkat was silent, then whispered “‘Lonlun’.”

Gamzee laughed, a hollow empty sort of laugh. One that twisted into Karkat’s muscles and made his blood go cold. He was still clutching onto Gamzee’s hands, trying to keep him from hurting himself more. “I guess I am.” That was all the taller troll mumbled. Karkat knew the rest of that sentence, even if Gamzee didn’t say it.

“You’re not. Don’t let--”

“Don’t let what?” Gamzee hissed, his hands curling into Karkat’s wrists. “Myself believe it? Oh motherfucker, you don’t know what it’s like to be me. OR HOW MOTHERFUCKING TRUE IT IS.”

“Gamzee!” Karkat ignored the pain of the claws digging into him. “Come back to me.”

“I’m still here, brother, just a little more enlightened.”

“This isn’t you, Gamzee. I refuse to believe it.” Gamzee was silent. Karkat could tell he was looking over the wounds. No matter how hard he tried, Karkat couldn’t stop himself from letting his eyes fall back to the words he could still see. Even if it felt like it had been months since they got on this ship, he could still see bruises. Karkat wanted to wince as he realized one was nearly a perfect handprint. It was faded, off-color, not as striking as a fresh bruise. But it was still there, lingering on his hip, another brand in and of itself. It had to have been a very wicked bruise to stick around this long.

Karkat moved closer, not too close lest the taller troll get nervous. He wanted to be there for him, to help him through this, he hated these stabs of pity he was getting every time his eyes followed the lines of a word. Any word on him just caused a flare of terrible consuming pity. Not only had he had to suffer those tortures but he’d always remember, he would and could never forget. Even if he lived to be a million sweeps, every scar and word would still be engraved into his skin.

“Gamzee, what happened?” Karkat took a breath and realized how that could sound. “What I mean is, how did you get these?” To calm him down, to fix this, he had to make sure Gamzee wasn’t alone in the memories. If he was alone or felt alone, Gamzee tended to get stupid.

“I said I’d be good.” The taller troll was mumbling at the wall, but Karkat could make it out enough that he wasn’t going to ask him to repeat it. It wasn’t so much about him hearing it, it was more about Gamzee getting it out in the open. “I said I’d be motherfucking good and all I want was to make them happy. Having them be proud. That I’d be theirs. I didn’t know what else to motherfucking do. She nearly bashed my head in. I thought if I was good, if I tried to make them happy, I might be able
to get out of there. Or outwait them, they’d let me out without chaining me up, and I could run. That was dumb of me to hope. I know if they let me out I’d be locked to one of them one way or another.”

Gamzee’s shoulders were shaking, Karkat didn’t doubt he was crying. Karkat kind of wanted to cry; his sweet, dopey, idiot of a friend had never sounded this hollow. Or this empty. Karkat almost preferred Gamzee’s anger to this. He’d never seen Gamzee be anything other than kind to everyone, no matter how rude or vicious another troll got Gamzee was there being his chipper, optimistic self. Karkat adored that trait as much as it annoyed him.

“She made me say it, say how I was theirs no motherfucking matter what. I said it, and I can’t shake the feeling about its truth. I’m just motherfucking like him, just like her. Give me a couple sweeps, shit, or maybe I should have just stayed. Been in my place and all. If I ain’t with them, I become that monster.”

Karkat reached a hand forward, and brushed along the sigils branded into the taller trolls neck. Suddenly, everything made a lot of sense. The two perpetrators, their stage, their victim, Gamzee’s general fears. Everything clicked into place.

“It’s not your place, no matter how much they wanted it to be.” Karkat kept his voice low, trying to soothe Gamzee and quell his own anger. He didn’t know the kind of monsters they had been up against, but now, he understood.

“I guess I should say that’s how I gots the mosts of them. This one...” Gamzee lifted his arm, Karkat bit his lip trying to stall any reaction he might have. “… is different.” He didn’t elaborate beyond that. Karkat wasn’t sure if he should press for information or not.

“Gamzee, this isn’t the truth. It’s their truth. You know that these--”

“Karkat!” The smaller troll wasn’t sure if it was the tone of voice that shook him so deeply. “All of them are true. I am worthless, I couldn’t fight them, I tried and gave up too easily. I’m a pet, seeing as I crawled around after them, they didn’t even have to ask sometimes. I did offer myself to them, traded my body and dignity over it. I am their fucking pail, I’d go into that, but I think you get the drift. I was their fucktoy, and hell, they showed up here that’d be the first thing I’d try.” Gamzee let out a whine, looking down at his arm. Karkat followed the line of sight and realized it was bleeding. “He does own me... Always and forever. At least they picked a stack of words that are the truth.”

“Gamzee.” Karkat tried to make his voice firm.

“No, just go. I won’t kill myself. Won’t even dig my claws into the scars. I just need... Time.”

“Gamzee.”

“Leave me alone.” That hurt more than Karkat could ever imagine. “I’ll come out soon. I just don’t want you to look at me. Fuck, I don’t want to look at myself”

Karkat backed off slowly, hesitantly. Going from his expression, Gamzee guessed he must be feeling worthless himself, and felt even worse for hurting him that way. “I’m holding you to that, okay? Do not come out of this room bleeding from anywhere. That’s an order from your captain.” He closed the door, but Gamzee could sense him lurking outside.

His teeth hadn’t grown back fully yet. He sank the stubs into his hand as hard as he could. No bleeding, just like Karkat said. He wondered, if he was caught again and grew boring, how he’d taste to them. He’d probably still get them high, and that was a bit of a comfort. Not much of one, but
it did make eating him a lot less appealing.

He sank to the floor and pulled his knees up to his chest. The water auto-shut off at some point, no one would have to worry about him wasting it. He held on to his knees, his finger tracing over the scars on both his arms. He wished he hadn’t promised that he wouldn’t try to remove the marks on him, because it would have been easy to dig his claws in and get rid of them. Make the marks his own instead of theirs. He bit onto his arm again, wishing for pain, or release, but instead just getting a dull throb. He closed his eyes, his body was shaking again and he could feel tears fighting towards his eyes but getting caught somewhere in his throat.

He didn’t regret his freedom, he didn’t want to be back, no matter how easy that would make things. He knew that all those wishes were because even though he had chosen one option, the other two still lingered. They could end his life still, until they were dead it could happen. Or he could take his own life, not have to deal with this pain, the constant reminders of it.

Maybe Karkat had been right to worry about him wanting to kill himself. It would be fairly simple, and the tub would catch most of the mess. They’d have some additional food supplies, even if it was sopor-encrusted. He shook his head. He didn’t want to die. He just felt powerless right now. As if no matter what he did he would end up back or something worse would happen. He wanted to live, just it was getting difficult.

He wished he hadn’t sent Karkat away, that he could curl up with him and somehow force the tears out of him and he’d feel better. Instead, he was curled up on the floor of a shower, wet, naked, and cold. Fingers tracing a word that made his intestines twist up and tear through him.

He pulled his hand from his arm and on the still-wet floor of the stall he traced the image that seemed burned into his mind’s eye. The Sul redrawn, and he swore he could hear his ancestor’s voice in his head. He’d been given his options, he’d made his choice. Even though they were probably light years away from each other he could feel his ancestor’s claws picking over his corpse. A scavenger picking off what was left from his bones. Perhaps Gamzee had been correct in naming the ghosts his skeletons.

A knock shot through the room. Gamzee lifted his head and looked towards the door. There was fear at first until he remembered where he was, and that he was only like this because of his own choice.

“Gamzee?” Karkat said from outside the door. “You okay? It’s been about an hour.”

Gamzee cocked his head towards the door, and decided that time was weird. It just ran away. He cleared his throat, and was about to respond, when he caught sight of the purple mark drawn on the bottom of the tub. He cursed under his breath. It would be unfair to wash it away, their water was precious. He looked at the brand on his arm, bleeding once more.

“Karkat...” His voice was rough. He didn’t know what to do. He reached over and put his still bloody hand over the Sul, trying to make it go away. “Karkat.” He tried again; even if he broke his promise he couldn’t handle being alone right now. He didn’t even realize he had hurt himself.

~

Karkat had bundled Gamzee back up in his clothes, and both were moving with the intent to find something to wrap up his arm with. Surprisingly, the smaller troll wasn’t angry about the wound. It only took three seconds of Gamzee trying to explain what happened before Karkat helped him get dried off and wrapped his arm up in the sleeve of his shirt.

They were looking around the flight deck, looking for the onboard first aid kit. Karkat promised he’d
keep it quiet, so the other trolls didn’t notice, or ask any questions. Someday Gamzee would have to thank the hotblooded troll for being the best moirail in the known and unknown universe.

Kanaya looked up from her sewing, watching them move around. She clicked her tongue, and Karkat’s grip on Gamzee’s arm tightened; that usually meant she had something she wanted to say.

“I don’t mean to offend, but those clothes really don’t look comfortable. The cut’s not right at-”

“Yes, okay, I’m wearing a fucking woman’s clothes, if you really wanna know,” Gamzee snapped. “I didn’t have too many motherfucking options.” Kanaya was right, though; the girl had been about the right size, but the shirt was tight around the shoulders and puckered slightly over the chest, and he had to keep checking to prevent the waistband from sliding down his hips.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend,” Kanaya said soothingly. “I just wanted to say I can adjust them for you if you want. I know it’s only a small thing, but it might help. I don’t think you need any additional discomfort right now.”

Karkat scowled. “Hey, how’d you like it if I started oiling your moirail’s joints or something?”

“Well, unless you suddenly learned to sew, I’m fairly sure I’m the best person for the job. Isn’t it also a moirail’s duty to track down outside help if they can’t solve a problem themselves?” Kanaya said icily.

“I guess. But aren’t I supposed to ask you, not you just assume that this is going to be a thing? Assuming makes you look like a desperate fool.”

“What has gotten into you Karkat? I swear you’re more petulant than usual.”

“I’m more moody? Forgive me, if this whole situation is the fucking dregs of shit the universe could have thrown at us. I’m hungrier than normal, because we’re rationing our food so much, and all of you are so mind-numbingly annoying that I’m pretty much at the impasse where I hate myself for even making friends in the first place, and would rather curl up into a ball of rage and hate than deal with all of your presumptive bullshit.”

“Guys, enough! Don’t make me auspisticise,” Gamzee snapped. “I probably do need better clothes, and it was real nice to offer.” He chewed his lip with the remnants of his teeth and tugged at his shirt hem. He really didn’t want to have to take them off.

“Come on,” Karkat said softly. “We’ll find something to wrap you up in so you can give them to her.” Karkat slowly moved his fingers towards Gamzee’s hand. The taller troll quickly took it, letting himself be guided away. “I can also wrap up your arm then, okay? I’ll try to make sure no one bothers you while it’s happening.”

“You’re sweeter than sugar.”

“You’re a hopeless romantic and a douchebag.” Karkat’s gaze settled on Equius. “Hey, Zahhak! You still owe Gamzee, start paying your debt by lending us a couple of towels. Clean ones.”

“Why would he need towels?”

“Just hand them over, you’ll get them back pretty soon.”

“The... Makara could always just forgo any type of cover while his clothes are being fixed. It shouldn’t be an issue.”
“Just hand them over.” Karkat held out his hand. “Leader’s orders.”

“You’re an insufferable excuse for a leader Vantas.” Equius decaptchalogued a few towels, and placed them into Karkat’s hand. “I do expect them back.”

“You’ll get them back. I don’t particularly feel like mopping up puddles of sweat because you’re missing two or three towels. I have more important things to do with my time than running around after you to clean up your messes.” Karkat kept rambling, hoping the trolls in the room would tune him out and stop paying attention while he grabbed the first aid kit, and then Gamzee and he could leave the room, and he’d bring Kanaya the clothes.

“Why are you grabbing the first aid kit? Did you get hurt already, Karkat?” Vriska asked from her seat at the controls. “Did Gamzee turn on you?”

“Vriska, go see if trolls can survive the decompression and coldness of space.”

“That wasn’t as snappy as normal, what happened? Are you seriously hurt?”

“I’m fucking fantastic. Wonderful even, nothing is wrong with me, no cuts, no bruises, except that one I got on my calf when we were leaving the Sufferer caves. No splinters, no dizziness, nothing is wrong with me. Now that that awkward line of questions is over we’ll be leaving.”

“Don’t run off too far, I require Gamzee’s measurements.”

Gamzee sighed. “Is that motherfucking really motherfucking necessary?”

“Yes, if you want your clothes to fit correctly,” Kanaya told him firmly. “Karkat, would it help if you did this part? I’m sure you’re capable of working a tape measure.”

Karkat looked at Gamzee, waiting for a response. Gamzee sighed, then shrugged. It was better than Kanaya, but really he didn’t want to have to have anyone wrap tape measure around him. He didn’t want to really know how much he had changed, nor did he want anyone to look at the scars. Sure, Karkat had seen them, but this wasn’t accidental.

“Hand it over, Kanaya.” Karkat held out his hand. “We’ll go over there, I’ll write them down for you.”

“Can’t you just say them so it doesn’t have to take too long?” Gamzee gave Karkat a slight nod.

“Fine. God, you’re obnoxiously pushy.”

Karkat took the tape measure and, scowling but working carefully so as not to upset Gamzee further, took the measurements Kanaya deemed necessary. As he looped the tape around Gamzee’s waist, he winced; Gamzee was never exactly fat, sopor slime not being very digestible, but now he was skeletal.

The tape caught on Gamzee’s shirt as he pulled it away, rucking up the hem. Eridan’s eyes widened as he caught sight of the brand on Gamzee’s stomach; “ketesk”. Wisely, he left the room before he found himself tempted to say anything. Gamzee yanked his shirt down and glared at the onlookers, daring them to speak. Karkat mumbled an apology. He had been trying to keep the clothes right where they were, apparently the universe couldn’t even grant him that small little assistance. Gamzee shook his head. Karkat took it as “it couldn’t be prevented, so it’s okay”. At least that’s what he hoped his internal Gamzee’s-odd-gestures-dictionary would translate it too.

“Thank you, Karkat,” Kanaya said, her voice slightly terse. “Now, I’ll need the clothes.”
“No, really?” Karkat hissed under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Come on, I’ll form a towel wall for you.” Karkat spoke up a little louder and did his best to ignore Kanaya completely. Karkat lifted up the towel, holding it as high as he could so Gamzee could kick off the clothes. All of it was done with surprising speed. Soon enough there was a bundle of clothes on the floor and Gamzee was wrapped up in towels. Karkat handed Kanaya the ball of clothes, and it seemed his turn to receive the cold shoulder. He shrugged and walked back over to Gamzee, who seemed content to curl up in the corner with one towel wrapped around his shoulders, another covering his legs, and the final one over his head and horns like a stupid veil without horn holes.

“Do you--”

“Gamzee,” Kanaya spoke over Karkat. “This isn’t meant to offend. But I do have two things I would like to ask.”

“What, sunnysis?”

“The first is if you might like me to remove this other sigil. I wouldn’t presume to replace it with anything, just remove it. The second is more of a concern I have. I notice you have lost quite a bit of weight. And while I’m not concerned if I can alter the clothes, I’m more concerned about your health--”

“To answer the first, remove it. I don’t care, the troll it came from is dead anyway. Ain’t like she can complain about her sigil being removed. And that second one isn’t a question, it was motherfucking rambling.”

“Well, there was a question there, which is do you think you might make it to our destination? You seem starved as it is.”

“Probably, I don’t know. Wouldn’t gain much motherfucking weight anyway right now. I still don’t have any of my teeth being real.”

“Right, yes, I hadn’t forgotten that detail. I was merely concerned. Since yo--”

“Don’t you got another troll to be concerned for?”

Karkat smirked and nodded at Gamzee. “Do you want to go somewhere else while I bandage up your arm?”

“Might as well stay, the more I move the more I risk. Know what I motherfucking mean? I don’t really feel like broadcasting more than I have to.”

“Got it. Can I have your arm?” Gamzee shifted underneath the towels and hesitated a moment before offering it up to Karkat. The smaller troll didn’t flinch or even blink twice at the word this time. Karkat pulled out bandages and antiseptic.

Gamzee had nearly perfectly traced the word on his arm, making it nearly impossible to avoid looking at. Gamzee’s ragged claws couldn’t do it as precisely as the knife that was used, but even the original scar was shaky, legible but scratchy. Karkat tried not to look at the word more than necessary as he cleaned off, though it struck him suddenly; having received a gift from the taller troll (a new set of caste limited sickles on his 6th wriggling day) he was familiar enough with Gamzee’s handwriting to recognise it. Gamzee had carved the word himself onto his arm.
When they were alone, Karkat would ask about it. Not right now, with at least Kanaya within earshot. Vriska was sitting at the ship’s controls, and Equius was messing around with some electronics that Karkat wasn’t even going to begin to figure.

“Karkat?”

“Yeah?” Karkat said dabbing off the cleaner with one of the other cloths.

“Can you help me with something?”

“No, I’m afraid that being your moirail means I no longer help you with anything.” Karkat sighed. “Of course I can fucking help you with something, what else would I do?”

“Well, you see, when I first met the Empress... to make a long story short she pierced my tongue. So she could leash me up like an animal. My hands are too shaky, and I can’t get a good grip on it to pull it out. Could you--”

“Yes.”

Karkat removed his hand from Gamzee’s arm, leaving the cloth covering the brand; he’d rather have it breathe, but the other trolls in the room were too close. Gamzee opened his mouth, and Karkat didn’t wince as he looked at the budding teeth pressing past Gamzee’s gums. The taller troll stuck out his tongue and Karkat reached out, fumbling with the tiny balls keeping the bar in his mouth. He had to wipe his fingers on his pants to keep them dry enough to get a grip.

There were a few things that were suspicious, Vriska decided. Karkat’s insistence on towels, Gamzee’s huddled frame in the corner, and the fact a first aid kit had to be grabbed, but she could overlook that. It wasn’t hers to know. It was when Gamzee opened his mouth and Karkat stuck his fingers in she had to look, curiosity nagging her terribly.

She could see the glint of metal, and understood that at some point Gamzee had gotten a barbell through his tongue. She didn’t extend a guess as to why, or when. She could vaguely guess, and didn’t want much more than that. She looked over the two trolls, and noticed a splotchy purple and white cloth hanging on Gamzee’s arm. It wasn’t Karkat that had been hurt. How Gamzee managed to get himself injured was a good question, she glanced around the room quickly to see if anyone had noticed her.

Alone in noticing it was the taller troll who was hurt, she was half tempted to ask what happened, but she doubted that would turn out well. Gamzee’s arm tensed as Karkat pulled on the jewelry through his tongue. The cloth shifted and she could see what had happened. The whole cut wasn’t new, she could see that it had been reopened. Part of the word was scarred and other part cut. She swallowed as she realized it was a word, and realized what the word was. She squirmed guiltily, remembering the time she’d used her powers to force Tavros into an unwanted kiss. He’d forgiven her, though right now she had difficulty understanding why. Much as she missed Spidermom, she was glad that rockslide had happened, and thus Vriska had no longer been required to control victims for her, before she’d got very far into puberty, and that she’d entered a steadying ashen triad with two more ethical trolls soon after; if she’d had any real interest at the time, who knew what she might have done before she knew better?

She cleared her throat, watching as Karkat held the jewelry in his fingers like it was the biggest success of his life. Gamzee gave him a little smile and both of them were talking again, too low for her to hear the words. She swallowed, stepping forward, watching Gamzee move his tongue around, as if it had finally been freed. She felt as if she should apologise. In another life, she could have turned out just as twisted. Even if Gamzee could be pretty spineless and annoying to talk to, that
didn’t mean she wanted to see her friend dead.

“Hey, uh, Gamzee? I know we didn’t talk much, you were more Tavros’ friend than mine, but I wanted to say I am really, really sorry this happened. And I’m sorry we didn’t get you out sooner.”

Gamzee nodded cautiously, wondering what she was planning. No way would Vriska just suddenly be nice, particularly over something like this. He stared at her for a moment, wondering what she was going to do next. He could feel his muscles shifting, getting ready to defend himself. In towels or not, he wasn’t going to take any shit; he’d done plenty of that already.

“I mean it, what happened to you is messed up... I can’t imagine...” Vriska wanted to sigh, she wasn’t that good at doing things like this. The point was everyone should be proud that she tried. She took a breath and decided to try to rephrase herself. “Well, maybe it’ll help if you look at it a different way,” she said in her best attempt at a kindly tone. “When you’re healed up all the way, your scars are gonna be fucking hardcore! Almost as cool as mine, even.” She grinned and gave him a double thumbs-up.

Gamzee leapt, and there was a horrible tearing noise followed by a scream, a splatter, and the sound of metal hitting flesh. The others watched in horror as Gamzee raised Vriska’s now-detached robotic arm and slammed it against her side once more. He wondered if it would break her ribs or the arm first, and for some reason he couldn’t shake how that thought didn’t bother him.

“I can give you some new wonderful scars. THEY’LL BE PRETTY MOTHERFUCKING HARDCORE. Don’t you think?” Vriska curled away from the blows, trying to pull herself away enough to defend herself, but in her attempts to scoot over she instead found herself running into his leg, and was unable to move it.

“Gam—...zee...” she choked out as her own arm came crashing down on her stomach. She moved her working arm and curled it around his calf. If she had been expecting this fight, it would have gone a lot smoother, and she wouldn’t be curled up on the floor trying to make it stop. She’d be kicking the shit out of him for trying to hurt her.

“Gamzee? Gamzee, no!”

Gamzee stopped as Tavros shouted. He looked up, tense and poised to run, and made eye contact. Tavros scurried forward and reached out, then froze, not sure if grabbing Gamzee’s hand would make things better or worse.

They stood there for a moment, Tavros’ hand hovering just above Gamzee’s. The purpleblood dropped his hand and the robotic arm that was in it. He sighed, shaking his head, trying to keep out the cloudy thoughts of rage that seemed stuck in a near-constant hum.

“What the fuck, Gamzee?!” Vriska hissed, regaining her composure and trying to stand, despite her head being fuzzing.

“Just motherfucking vanish your words.” Gamzee hissed, kicking the arm towards Vriska’s feet. “I don’t want to be hearing nothing from you. From any of you. Best to be leaving it where it is.”

Kanaya stared at Vriska even as she helped her up. “What in the name of the Mother Grub did you say to him?”

“I was only trying to help!” Vriska scowled and snapped “Bad clown. Very bad clown.” Gamzee drew a finger across his throat meaningfully and stalked off. Karkat quickly followed, slightly wide eyed.
Terezi hid a smile. “You know, maybe if you were me having your delicious cherry shoes in your mouth would suck less.”

“Fuck you.”

~

\textit{A/N: Ketesk (n.) pail. pl. keteskiij}
Hashaan (n.) a friendly or known beast. pl. Hashannij
Lonlun (adj) worthless
Muvetir (n.) 1. one who offers 2. derogatory: slut (slang)
Jisituni-Rorut: (Obsolete) see Jisituni and Rorut
Jisituni (v.) to force someone into a one sided kismesissitude.
Rorut (n.) toy, puppet, or trinket. pl. Rorutij
Chapter 15

Sollux detached the helmet, slumped in the empty pilot’s seat, and leaned against the control panel, massaging his temples.

“So how is the new rig working?” Aradia asked, pushing the door to and sitting beside him.

“Well, I have a bad headache, but I’m outthide the rig and we’re thtill moving and not dead. I think we can thay concluthively that it workth.”

“Excellent.” Her metal hand went to his belt, while the flesh one brushed his sweaty hair from his eyes. “Perhaps a celebration is in order?”

Sollux chuckled. “I’m more than okay with that.”

Seconds later they were kissing, pausing only long enough to strip off both their shirts. He pushed her long skirt right up to her hip with one hand, rubbing her horn base with the other.

“Wait, stop for a moment,” she gasped, pulling away and trying to cover herself. “We have company.”

“Are you theriouth?” Sollux growled. They had gotten used to being on a tiny ship, but by now usually everyone was busy doing whatever it was they did, and left him and Aradia well enough alone. He glared towards the door, and if he wasn’t used to Aradia’s typical creepiness he might have asked her how she knew. It was too dark to fully see the troll standing in the gap, but Sollux could see his shadow, standing rigid with nervousness. “GZ, you can’t keep doing thith.” Sollux groaned. “Don’t you have KK and AT that you can bother?”

The figure moved, pushing the door open further to reveal his embarrassed face. Worse than embarrassed, he looked like he’d seen a ghost. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be interrupting anything. Karkat’s holding some sort of court with the others in the mess block and Tavros is there too…”

“Tho why come to uth?”

“Karkat said you were okay so I figured I could handle being near you when things got motherfucking difficult,” Gamzee mumbled, shuffling his feet.


“I was just trying not be to be near some trolls, then get all stupid… I’ll go, sorry again.”

Sollux sighed, the mood was very lost, and his head was still hurting, he could feel it more now than ever. He let something drop out of his sylladex and held it out. “Look, if I let you borrow thith, will you go away for like an hour?” He tried to smile ingratiatingly.

Gamzee looked at the object. It was a substitute lusus, known in highblood terms as a “plushie”. Other than that, it was unidentifiable; round, yellow, goggle-eyed, and with some appendages which may have been either wings or ears. He looked back at Sollux in confusion.

Sollux sighed. “I got it when I wath a wriggler, don’t judge it.”

“I won’t be judging it, I was just looking at it.” Gamzee tucked it away, holding it between both his forearms and his stomach. He looked at the both of them, a little nervous. “Thanks, beebro…I’ll be
getting out of your hair. I mean it, I didn’t mean to be interrupting nothing…” With a little nod the
taller troll turned away, still holding onto the strange plushie.

Sollux looked at Aradia, then shook his head. “That wath unique.”

He moved to try to hold her again, and she pushed him gently away. “Wait for just a moment. I think
I should talk to him.”

“What, about not barging in on uth?” Sollux grumbled.

“No, Sollux, but we can bring that up… It’s just he’s haunted.”

“Haunted? You mean he has ghootth following him?”

“A lot of them, he’s had them since he came back. They’re sad ghosts though, not angry ones.
Which is strange. But we, at least I, should talk to him.”

Sollux sighed and handed Aradia her shirt. “Fine, fine. I can wait.”

“Gamzee?” Aradia called after him, once she was appropriately clothed. “Come here, we should
talk.”

It took a moment for Gamzee to return, not a necessarily long one but to Sollux it seemed like it took
forever. He wanted this conversation done, and hopefully the two of them would have a bit of time
to do something that would help his headache go away.

“Yeah, what do you need, sis?” Gamzee hovered in the doorway as he spoke, keeping himself half
in shadows and mostly away from them. Sollux decided this was far creepier than the troll Gamzee
used to be. Of course he couldn’t really stand to be alone with the sopored-up clown back then.

“I was wondering if you noticed anything odd about yourself,” Aradia said. It was obvious she was
trying to break the news delicately. Trolls were suspicious and superstitious by nature. It took great
leaps to be logical in the face of must unseen matters. Sollux and Aradia were quite used to it
themselves, but neither of them knew how Gamzee would respond.

There was a definite silence between all of them. With a sigh, Sollux broke it. “Have you notithed
anything odd around you?” He clarified. He wondered if Gamzee was still a slow-processing idiot,
or if he’d lost that trait.

“Other than the whole ancestral psychic powers? Not really, no.” Gamzee’s voice was tense. Almost
dark, but he did seem to have a handle on it.

“About that.” Aradia looked at a point to Gamzee’s left. He turned, but saw nothing. “It seems you
brought company with you.”

“Company?” Gamzee’s eyes darted around quickly, looking for whatever might be around him,
mostly worried it was an unwanted eavesdropper listening for the real reason he’d wanted to talk to
Sollux. The last thing he wanted was for someone his mind didn’t consider friendly to overhear his
conversation and start asking questions.

“Yes,” Aradia said softly. “Gamzee, it’s alright. Look at me.” He looked over to his spooky sister.
“You can’t see them, but they can see you. I can see them, hear them, talk with them…”

“You saying… You’re saying I brought my Kin here?”
“They are nodding. Well, a few of them aren’t. I don’t think I can actually see all of them. But quite a few. They say there are more.”

“Sennir… Laneen,” Gamzee mumbled, looking around to his right and left, wishing he could see them. Instead he was left with empty air on either side of him, and that cold feeling he hadn’t been able to shake since he escaped. At least that might be able to be explained. He hadn’t been crazy, or perhaps he had been. The line was so thin now-a-days, it was hard to tell.

“A yellowblood girl and a cerulean boy, yes? Laneen Chaton and Sennir Lilura?” Aradia glanced over the invisible crowd. “Tilorn. Anuios. Keskay. Ukuthe…” The living side of her face was sad. “Some of them are so small, so young…”

Sollux was used to weird around Aradia, but being surrounded by ghosts, that from what he could logically understand were the victims of similar circumstance as Gamzee, seemed to take the cake. He was sure they were around though. As Aradia said names the room seemed to get colder.

“Can they all hear me?”

“Yes, though they have a hard time speaking with you… You’re not the right kind of psychic.”

“How many are there? I wondered.”

“Two thousand, four hundred and sixty, Laneen says,” Aradia replied after a moment. Gamzee inhaled sharply. He had known there must be a lot, but the number made it seem more real. “And those are only the ones he bound. Others died too soon.”

“They have anything they want to say?”

“Don’t become our Keeper”, Aradia said softly.

Gamzee’s muscles tensed, and he cast his eyes around the room. “I’m sorry” he mumbled. It wasn’t that loud, but Sollux could pick it up. “Promise I won’t, and I’ll keep my mind about not finding a Hag… Thanks, spookysis, I couldn’t free them but at least they’re with me and not with him. It’s a consolation prize, but pretty damn nice in comparison. Thanks for telling me.”

“No problem, Gamzee, just know, if you feel like you’re alone, you’re not. Alright?”

“This some subtle way to tell me to stop wandering in on trolls?”

“Yes.”

“ Heard loud and clear. Just I had a quick question… It’s kind of important, but I can ride off if you all want to be motherfucking talking about it later.”

“You’re already here, you might ath well juth athk.”

“So, uh, Sollux. How’s your pale thing with Fef going?” Gamzee asked, mock-casually. “Still fine?”

Sollux stared. “Uh. Yeth. Why?”

“N-no reason.”

“You haven’t taken up AC’th habit of thipping uth, have you?”

“No, I was just wondering… if things like got all changed up while I was out of it.”
“Oh. Well, no, we all flipped around for a long time, but FF and I thettled on pale, and AA and I on fluthhed - I gueth you thaw that.”

“Good, good. No chance of flipping back?”

“I think KN would be pithed if we did and I thtole her new moirail.”

“Oh, oh yeah! Karkat mentioned that. Uh, congrats,” Gamzee said, nodding to Aradia. “So, uh, keep it going?”

Sollux frowned. “Are you hitting on one of uth, or athking after FF?”

“No! Fuck no.” Gamzee shuddered violently.

“Wow, way to inthult my choiceth.” Sollux shook his head. “And me too. You’re a great friend, GZ.”

“No, it ain’t that. It’s that since I was all gone, I just wanted to know. Last thing I wanted to be doing is to climb all on and mash up on toes, y’know?”

“I gueth? But you’re making leth thenthe than normal, GZ.”

“I was just all curious about the relationships of everyone. Don’t want to offend any of my warm blooded motherfuckers. See, this motherfucker is trying to be considerate.”

“… Thank you?” Aradia said, sounding uncertain, insofar as she ever had any emotion in her voice these days. Gamzee was darkly amused; he knew something the psychic sister didn’t. And he’d keep it that way. If Sollux stayed pale with Feferi and he made sure not to screw up with Karkat, maybe he could delay the inevitable, or at least keep it in a less disgusting quadrant. Then again in coming sweeps he’d find himself moirail-less and Feferi would be too, that was the highblood curse. After a time all your quadrants died… Maybe if it came close to passing he’d go on a pilgrimage to the deepest parts of space. If both of them were alone, and still friends, no doubt they would turn into something like that. He shuddered. He’d fake pity or hate and sexual attraction, as long as it stayed out of that quadrant.

“No problem, sis, and I’ll leave you on to be doing your business.” Gamzee looked over his shoulder briefly, wondering if he could try the rites for the Kin again. He doubted it would work, Suls tended to make things permanent, and he had no idea how to reverse it.

“Thank you, Gamzee.”

“Thhut the door behind you.” Sollux called after the taller troll’s retreating form. He raised a hand to show he heard and the door slid closed. Sollux sighed. “Okay, that’th taken care of. Where were we?”

Aradia’s face showed little emotion, as always, but her response was enthusiastic. Once again their tongues entwined, again they separated only long enough to remove clothing. This time it would be perfect…

“Hey, guys, have you seen my- wwhoa!”

“Oh for fuck’th thake! Go away, ED!”

Eridan wrinkled his nose. “Geez, don’t make such a fuss, it’s not like I’m interruptin’ anyfin important.”
Sollux psionically picked up Eridan and threw him out of the room. There was a clang as the seatroll’s head connected with the wall, and another as the door slammed behind him.

“Thtay out.” Sollux’s voice echoed around in the hall, despite the door being closed between them. Eridan was too busy rubbing his head trying to stop a headache from coming on. He stomped back to the mess block, grumbling to himself; now had to wander around the rest of the ship until the flight deck was open so he could have his book. All because Aradia and Sollux were too busy being disgusting. He honestly didn’t know what anyone saw in that guy. Sollux was more of an asshole then regular trolls. It wasn’t like he could have been the only one who had to see that. They could have at least waited until they were someplace a little more private, or maybe taken over one of the bunk blocks. Then no one would have to wander in on that…

Sollux looked at Aradia, a sigh wanting to come out. He rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe I uthed to date that guy.”

~

“Gamzee?” Karkat peered into the bunk block, seeing a purple-and-black shadow in the corner. “Where have you been?”

“Here,” came the reply, as Gamzee looked up. “How’d the meeting go?”

“Fine, but I was hoping you’d be there.”

“Sorry, Karbro, not really fit to be motherfucking dealing with trolls at the moment.” Gamzee unwrapped his arms from the toy and showed it to Karkat. “I got company though, don’t you be worrying.”

Karkat looked at the plushie. “Oh boy, I’d forgotten about Fusby.”

“Fusby?”

“I first met Sollux when we were about two, I took one look at that thing, and I said ‘that is one fucking ugly stuffed bee’. It sort of stuck.”

“Oh, so it is supposed to be a bee?” Gamzee muttered, squinting at it. “Huh. I did wonder.”

~

“Gamzee,” Terezi hissed. The purpleblood seemed like he was asleep, curled on the bunkblock floor, disdaining the metal racks designed to hold the recuperacoons the crew didn’t have. Terezi knew better. Gamzee was doing that thing where he lay on the floor, looking asleep, but was just listening to the ship, and the trolls on it working. “Gaamzee,” she repeated, louder.

“What?”

“Can I talk to you.”

“You already are.”

“I meant really talk to you, I can smell your eyes are closed.”

Gamzee sighed, Terezi could sense him move up to sitting. There was a pause, no doubt seeing if this was good enough for a real conversation. Terezi didn’t ask him to move more. That really wasn’t the point. She just liked it when a troll would look at her when she spoke, she wanted their undivided
“What do you motherfucking want?”

“Listen, Gamz… I know everyone’s been saying it. You’re probably sick of hearing it by now. And I know it doesn’t fix anything. But I’m sorry for what happened. I don’t know what’s going on in your head, but I thought maybe I could give you something to help.”

“That’s pretty fucking much a stretch to think that you could be doing anything like it. What would you have done, huh? Given the floor a fresh coat of teal? Anyway, I can’t think of nothing that might be given that could all being to help unless it’s being a motherfucking time machine.”

Terezi sighed and moved her hand to her pocket, pulling out a captchacard. She played with it briefly. He was right; she, like all the other trolls, had no idea how to help him. Her training, reading, and studying did nothing to help her here. She couldn’t look to the law for help, she couldn’t even tell Gamzee the horrible fate his abusers might receive. Alternian law was just not set up that way. Officially, he was the one who had broken the law by not dying.

“I know.” She nodded, messing up her sense of direction. “I just want to give you something to let you know that I’m here for you. I don’t think any of us can fully help you, but… Am I facing you?”

“Basically.” Gamzee shrugged. Terezi took a deep breath through her nose, looking for the smell of grapes, polka dots, and must. That musty, dirty smell never seemed to leave Gamzee, even after he showered. It was vaguely like blood, and vaguely like someone never cleaned out their cooking hull. It was just something that was always there, making Gamzee nearly smell like rotten grapes. Terezi had the good sense not to mention that to him, no doubt in her mind that it would upset him.

She found him again, turning so she could better face him, and she hoped she was looking at him. She reached out her hand. “I know you’re against touching, but can I briefly just so I can actually hand this to you?”

“Okay…?” He let their clawtips brush, just enough to orient her, and something soft dropped from her sylladex into his hand. She’d made good use of the shreds of black cloth Kanaya had cut from his shirt, along with various other scraps. He noticed she’d avoided using any purple. He held the decidedly lumpy scalemate up and blinked at it.

“I thought Sollux might want his bee back at some point, so I made you this instead. Isn’t she cute?”

Gamzee sighed. “Terezi, plushies ain’t gonna fix everything.”

“I know, but I can’t think of a better way to get across that I’m on your side.”

“You are?” Gamzee was actually stunned.

“I would like you to stop trying to murder our shipmates, but other than that, yes.”

“Well, I would have thought with the law and everything you’d be itching for my proper and up all hanging.” Gamzee shrugged. “I was weak and I shirked my duty to be removed from the motherfucking gene pool.”

“Gamzee, do you seriously expect that you should have been able to do anything more than what you did? What would you say if one of us was in there? Would you expect us to be able to get out easily?”

“Th-that’s different…” Gamzee trailed off.
“I can agree that some laws are stupid.” Terezi sighed thinking back to the notes she had from her ancestor. “Some laws are for blood, not justice. You’re not the strongest or smartest troll I’ve ever met, but I don’t think you need a good lynching. I thought hard on that too, justice can be tricky sometimes. But I’ve learned there is a difference between justice and law. What is law isn’t always just, and what is just isn’t always law. They’re not interchangeable phrases.”

“That’s all kinds of surprising to hear you say. I was sure that you’d be after me, been basically avoiding you because any hanging would be slow and drawn out here.”

“Believe it or not.” Terezi sighed. “Anyway, even if plushies won’t fix it… I know when I was a wriggler I used to get scared sometimes. I didn’t have anyone but me. I used to imagine that my scalemates would come to life and protect me if things got too bad. Maybe you can do the same thing.”

“I can see what you mean.”

“Why, why did you phrase it like that? I mean seriously, I’m still blind here. That didn’t go away when you were gone.”

“My lusus wasn’t around either. More around than yours in the physical, but at least yours taught you to see other ways. Mine taught me jack shit. Well, he taught me how to relocate a dislocated bone, but who would have thought that motherfucking knowledge would have use. Only thing he be teaching me, must have known I’d need it later.”

“Alright, I was slightly insensitive. Got it, sorry, just explaining the whole thought process behind the scalemate. But that doesn’t mean you get to bring up my blindness.”

“Sorry, sis, didn’t mean to get any hurting about your lack of ability to see. I mean that, I ain’t got any problems with you. ‘Specially now that I’m knowing you ain’t going to drop me from some gallows. Believe it or not, I’m pretty sure I still like being alive.”

“Apology accepted. I’m glad you can talk through some things… You know, Gamz, maybe you should try that more often.”

“Talk through shit?”

“Yeah, might be more conducive to helping you than the other crap you’re doing. Right now you’re trying to act out the sentence without the trial. You should do some interrogation first. Or something. Maybe you want to replace that metaphor with one a little more you. You’re mostly just really depressing to be around. Worse than Aradia right after her accident. I understand, but I’m not one to walk on eggshells and you’re such a downer.”

“Sorry, I guess…”

“It’s just like, geez, Gamz is such a downer these days. I’m almost missing that doesn’t-give-a-shit about anything asshole who sopored himself up to the metaphorical gills.”

“I think that Gamzee died. It was pretty graphic too, I’m sure it would have been a pretty nice crime scene for you. Good thing you weren’t there though. Still, he’s pretty much motherfucking dead and I don’t think he’ll ever be making a chance at getting to resurrection.”

“Well, we should probably find out, instead of just thinking. If he shows back up the whole ship is going to get confused. Which one is the real Gamzee? How do we tell?”

“I suddenly having the feeling that’s being more deep than it seems.”
“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t.” Terezi shrugged. She reached forward slowly, trying to not touch Gamzee but at the same time pat the new scalemate on the head. “Take care of her, she can help protect you. It’s a dragon after all and dragons are really good at protecting.”

“Got it.”

“You should name her,” Terezi said, patting the plushie one more time for good measure.

“Guess I should, since you’re the maker of all of them you must know the way that this is going.” Terezi smiled. She could sense Gamzee looking over the plushie, and she was almost one hundred percent positive he was starting to think up names.

“But seriously, Gamzee, just do me one favour? Leave Equius and Eridan alone. They said something stupid, but they aren’t the ones who did this. If hurting them would make this not have happened to you I’d be right there holding them down, but it won’t. Quit it.”

Gamzee’s hackles rose. “Maybe it won’t, but it makes me feel a lot motherfucking better.”

“Does it really?”

“Not a lot, but nothing does.”

“Then maybe you’re going about it the wrong way? I’m not saying you aren’t entitled to a little revenge. Sometimes a troll just needs to dish out a little revenge. But really we’ve done that ridiculously complicated revenge plot already. I don’t want a repeat. Maybe you should just keep your distance until you get your anger under control.”

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to control it no more. Sopor controlled it before, I never did. Thought I learned to keep it, but nope, that was all a lie too. Now, I’m just fucking fucked up at trying, you understand?”

“No, and I don’t think I ever will. It’s not my burden to carry. We all have one, Gamz, the type of troll one is depends on how they hold it up. It’s my burden to bring justice, it’s not easy. Justice left me blind. You’ll find your purpose, and perhaps whatever it is is why you went through what you did. Fate has a way of molding a troll so they’ll do its will.”

“I’m one of superstition, don’t get me motherfucking wrong, but fate can’t have no reason to be putting anyone through that. Not me, not the Kin. I mean, fate might have had a plan for one or two, I’d give it that motherfucking leniency, but two-thousand-four-hundred-sixty different trolls? I guess I should say two-four-six-one since I might not be dead, but I’m just as much there. You gonna tell me fate was being making with motherfucking them?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. I’m not an expert on fate. Maybe it did, maybe it didn’t. Maybe their fate is forever connected to yours. Maybe whatever fate has planned for you stretches back to when the first one fell? Fate isn’t bound to space or time. It’s a separate entity that knows and sees all.”

Gamzee sighed. “Y’know, maybe you’re being right. But still.”

“Just think about it, okay?”

“What would you name her?” Terezi almost got whiplash from how fast Gamzee changed the topic of conversation. She tilted her head down, hopefully looking at where the plush was generally. She could feel Gamzee staring at her, and she would have been lying if she said it didn’t slightly unnerve her.
“I don’t know.. Something with patches, she’s yours you should name her.”

“I like Patches. I ain’t no good with names, only names that be coming to mind are names of dead trolls. That is being too many names to up and put on just one scalemate. But Patches. I like it.”

Terezi smiled a little bit. “Well, if you like it. It can be her name. Patches.” The air shifted around, all she could assume had Gamzee nodded. “Will you think about it?”

“Think about leaving the two of them alone?” Gamzee sighed. “Yeah, I’ll put my motherfucking thinking about it.” Terezi held in her sigh; from that tone of voice it wasn’t high on his priorities list. He’d, maybe, think about it later. “Make sure I don’t kill them as long as my mind stays with me, I shouldn’t be hurting them too serious either. Made that promise, I don’t want to really hurt them, just hurt them enough I can thank them for their wonderful motherfucking advice. You get it, lawsis?”

“Not really, I don’t think any of us will ever get it. All I know is I miss my dopy, unfazable friend. I know he’s gone, but I don’t know about the person walking around in his skin.” Terezi shook her head. “It seems like he’s going to let a couple assholes ruin his life. Not stand up for himself. But I guess it’s his choice.”

Gamzee made a motion to speak back but Terezi was already walking away. She didn’t want to argue, but she wasn’t going to let Gamzee just get away without hearing her opinion. Maybe what she said would help, maybe not. But at least she tried.

(With thanks to http://brainbent.tumblr.com for the Fucking Ugly Stuffed Bee.)
Chapter 16

A siren sounded, knocking the entire ship out of a sound sleep. Everyone jerked to their feet, shouting and searching frantically for the fire.

“Don’t panic, don’t panic!” Equius yelled over the din, raising his hands in a request for calm.
“Don’t worry, it’s all under contro-”

“Aaack!”

Equius noticed the weight on the back of his head and turned enough to realise Eridan was dangling behind him, trying to get his feet under himself. Closer inspection proved that the seadweller’s scarf had been tied firmly to the ends of Equius’ hair, and had been pulled tight when Equius stood up suddenly.

Gamzee was on the other side of the room, noticeably close to the fire alarm, humming innocently.

Karkat rushed to turn off the alarm, then turned to Gamzee and massaged his own temples.
“Gamzee, when I told you to stop threatening to fuck them, I did not mean you should start actually attempting to kill them. What part of ‘I want everyone to reach the new planet alive’ is not getting through to you?”

“Didn’t kill them or even try to do it. Just making them stick together. Easier to track them that way.” It was hard to tell if Gamzee was smirking, or if it was a trick of his scars. Judging by the tone of his voice, it was likely he was smirking.

Equius lowered himself down so Eridan’s feet could touch the floor. They would require assistance to get out of this bind and neither of the two trapped were sure if anyone would help them. Kanaya stepped forward, shaking her head.

“Gamzee, I think we all understand you’re frustrated, but don’t you think this is taking it to an extreme? You could have easily broken Eridan’s neck or strangled him.” Kanaya first pulled the scarf from around Eridan’s neck, and began to untangle it from Equius’ hair. “You need to learn to get your frustrations out in a healthier manner.”

“This is healthier. Better than what the other parts of me are thinking. They are hard to ignore, I be listening to the words of getting us all there alive. If I ain’t be listening to them, you’d all up and forget either of them were ever our friends. It’d be easy to, both of them sleep so soundly…”

“Gamzee,” Kanaya started. “Please.”

“Please what? I all know how my story ends. I get how I will become after some sweeps. It isn’t going to be a shock either. One day I’ll wake up and I know what I’ll be. Hopefully by then most of you’ll be dead and gone, if not I know the first things that will happen…” Gamzee sighed.
“Nevermind, forget I said anything, just go about your lives. I’ll make sure there ain’t even a pinch of risk in them getting their dead to happen.”

Kanaya sighed. “I suppose that’s better than nothing.”

“Gamzee,” Karkat said, grabbing onto the purpleblooded troll’s wrist, then quickly moving his hand away. Karkat was getting frustrated by this lack of ability to touch him and console him. “I’m not too happy with them either, but you can’t keep doing things that can kill them. Just try to find another way to get your anger out.”
“Karkat is right. If you need help, go to him,” Nepeta said. “I’ll help if I can, but it’s really his job.”

“Of course, should he be unavailable, I would be willing to offer help,” Kanaya said sweetly, earning a glare from Karkat.

Gamzee’s brow wrinkled. “Hey, why are you acting so motherfucking jealous, sunnysis? You already have a moirail, and I didn’t think you even liked me much.”

“Please leave me out of this,” Aradia said, blankly as always. “If Kanaya wants to help you I’m okay with it.”

“I am not jealous! I merely thought your new relationship could use some assistance in spreading its metaphorical wings, particularly considering the difficult circumstances.”

“Yeah, well, for now it’s quite happy in its metaphorical nest,” Karkat said, scowling.

~

After dinner it was time for that conversation, one of the other trolls would bring up something. More often than not it was Eridan or Equius, they said the wrong thing and all the trolls would be back to wondering if all of them were really going to make it to this other planet alive. Of course, that was usual. Tonight was a little different. Eridan and Equius were busy minding their own business. Karkat and Gamzee were tucked away into the corner chatting in low tones.

The other trolls were settling in, waiting until they were all tired enough to sleep, when a yelp jarred them from all of their individual thoughts. They quickly looked around for the source of the noise. Seeing Gamzee drawn back against the wall, paler than usual, explained the source very quickly.

“Whatever did you do, Karkat?” Kanaya asked, but it sounded more like a demand.

“Nothing, I just sort of forgot something briefly. I’m sorry, Gamzee, it won’t happen again.”

“Not that I don’t want to get normal with you, but just warn me next time. I ain’t too good with surprises or any of the likes.”

There was silence for a moment. Everyone in the room was almost certain that it was going to be a quiet evening, before there was a little cough, and clearing of the throat. Eridan looked away from the book he had brought and over to the two trolls in the corner.

“You knoww Gam, I get it. I get that you don’t wwant to be touched. Or really talk about it. No one wwants to.”

“It’s a bit motherfucking late for help or you trying to sympathize with me.”

“Gam, howw many times do I hawe to say I’m sorry for you to beliewe it?”

“It ain’t a matter of sorry motherfucker. This is consequences to your actions. You fucked me over, I get to fuck you over. Makes perfect sense to this motherfucker.”

“You’ve done plenty, can’t wwe just call it ewen? Come on, Gam, it could hawe been wworse, you could hawe died or somethin’. You’re here noww, can’t you just get ower it?”

“It’d be smart for you to seal up your mouth parts and keep them that way. You ain’t wanting to be saying these things to me. You won’t like the motherfucking consequences.”

“Eridan, what part of ‘do not taunt the murderous clown’ did you not pick up from Mindfang’s
Vriska sighed. “One ruined page wasn’t enough to lose that message.”

“Says you,” Terezi said quietly, earning a scowl.

Eridan rolled his eyes, ignoring them. “Okay, sorry, didn’t mean to offend you, but come on. Can’t we get on with our lives already?”

“You’re still talking. Why are you still motherfucking talking?”

“I’m tryin’ to end this,” Eridan said indignantly. “Unlike some trolls, I actually want us to be a team again. Hard to do when one member of the group wants to kill you.”

“Eridan, can you just shut up and accept your platonic hate in peace? Until it passes, if it passes,” Vriska groaned, leaning against the control panel.

“I’m serious! Sorry, didn’t mean to have you get hurt. I couldn’t help it if I didn’t understand what advice you needed.”

“Okay, Eridan, you’ve vented your frustrations, now shut up and let us all spend the rest of the daybreak in peace. Your problem hasn’t changed, and Gamzee’s lack of caring hasn’t changed. So, we’re at another stalemate. Glad that’s over.”

“Come on, Kar, I’m trying to apologise. Sorry it happened, but what you needed help with sounded stupid. You can’t blame me for not taking you ser-”

“Sounded ‘stupid’, did I? I’LL SHOW YOU MOTHERFUCKING STUPID…”

After a brief tussle and a lot of shouting, Eridan found himself with his horn lodged under a panel in the ship’s wall and Gamzee straddling his legs. He tried to free himself, then froze as he realised Gamzee was unbuttoning his shirt. He swallowed, squeezed his eyes shut, and parted his legs as far as he could with Gamzee’s knees in the way, sniffling “Fuck, I knew this was comin’. Just get it over with, okay?”

Karkat stared in horror. “Gamzee? Gamzee, no! You promised me you wouldn’t—”

“Please, Karbro, you couldn’t pay me enough to stick my bulge in this loser.”

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but I know this won’t be good. Please don’t hurt him.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna be hurting the squishy little fishy,” Gamzee crooned, strumming down across Eridan’s gillflaps lightly with his fingertips, then up with the flats of his claws, making the seatroll shiver. “I ain’t even gonna be leaving a mark…” With a wicked grin, he attacked in earnest.

Karkat moved to run forward, then stopped as Eridan’s agonised shriek turned into shrill bubbly giggles. He gaped. “… Okay, what the fuck is he doing and should we be stopping him?”

“Ah.” Equius rubbed his neck nervously. “Remember I said he mentioned roughhousing which hurt? I may have omitted the exact nature of such. Of course this was before anything more damaging happened, so we just thought…” He looked at Karkat’s face, then the expressions of the others, and blustered “Well, would you have taken him seriously if he said that?”

“…Possibly not,” Karkat admitted. “I’m not sure whether to stop him or applaud him for finding something non-lethal to do.”

“Okay, Gam, you proved your point, now you can st-” Eridan’s words were interrupted by a
scream as he lost control again.

Vriska smirked. “I’m sure Eridan would prefer you stopped him, but when did we ever listen to
him?”

Gamzee rolled off Eridan and turned around, giving him a breath’s respite before running his claws
up Eridan’s thigh and over his hipbone. Eridan squealed and drew his legs up, which proved to be a
mistake when Gamzee wrapped an arm around his legs and pulled off his shoes. Eridan’s screams
reached a new pitch as claws met flesh again, his own claws almost sending up sparks against the
floor as he thrashed frantically, and Gamzee grinned.

“Well, ain’t this just the most MOTHERFUCKING ADORABLE THING?”

Between laughs, Eridan gurgled and choked out something that sounded like “can’t breathe”.

“I know,” Gamzee cooed, looking over his shoulder so he could make eye contact.

“MOTHERFUCKING HURTS, DON’T IT? Mess up your breathing long enough and it rots your
thinkpan, you know, but then FOR THAT TO BE A PROBLEM YOUR THINKPAN WOULD
HAVE TO ACTUALLY MOTHERFUCKING WORK.” He punctuated the last word with a
sharp pinch to the sensitive webbing. “Less fun than you thought, huh? YOU CAN’T BREATHE,
I’m all up in your personal space, AND IF YOU COMPLAIN YOU’LL ONLY SOUND LIKE A
CRY-GRUB. Won’t break you on its own, no, BUT IT SURE AS FUCK GETS INTO THE
CRACKS. But the real point is that it also means THAT IT’LL HURT A MOTHERFUCKING
LOT MORE when I do THIS!”

Still gripping Eridan’s ankle, Gamzee stood up and spun back around. Before anyone could move,
his foot came down with an audible thud, followed rapidly by another high-pitched scream, then
silence.

Gamzee chuckled darkly. “Maybe the old bastard had a point. That really is funny when it isn’t
happening to me.” He dropped Eridan’s ankle and walked away, whistling.

Terezi shook her head. “I can’t decide if that was really funny or just disturbing.”

“Actually, seeing Eridan in pain is kind of hot. Brings back a lot of good memories.”

“Vriska, shut up.”

Eridan managed to free his horn and sit up straight, taking off his tear-fogged glasses and trying not
to put pressure on his groin in the process, and gasped out “Equ, if you’re gettin’ off on this, you’re
fuckin’ dead.”

“Trust me, Ampora, none of my personal fantasies will ever involve you in any capacity.”

“… Yeah wwell you suck.”

~

“I don’t know why you’re complaining, it’s hardly the first time you’ve been kicked in the seedflap
and I doubt it’ll be the last. It certainly won’t be if you keep bothering me.”

“Aw, c’mon, Kar, there’s no glubbin’ wway he’s going to stop noww! That wwas just testing the
wwaters, noww he knowwws he can get away wwith shit it’ll get much wworse! You’we gotta do
somefin!”
“He was right. You do sound like a cry-grub.”

Eridan’s eyes started to water behind his glasses. “Please? I thought we were friends!”

“I put up with you when we were wrigglers because you were too much of a wuss to tell Feferi you wanted to flip quadrants and find a less dysfunctional moirallegiance. That does not make us friends now.”

“Kar, please, I told him I’m sorry! I really didn’t know!”

Karkat grabbed Eridan’s collar and snarled into his face “Listen, Eridan, do you think ‘sorry’ would make everything better if that happened to you? Do you think words would fix anything?”

“They’d help!” Eridan’s lip trembled. “I said I didn’t know, he didn’t know, can’t we both just leave it in the past? I can’t take this much longer, I swear he’s gonna kill me! Glub.”

“Stop glubbing at me,” Karkat sighed. “I’m pretty sure he’s not actually going to kill you and he said he’s definitely not really going to do that. Just deal with it for now. It’s not like he can do anything to you that’s worse than being you already was.”

“You know, I’d mind less if he was at least pullin’ the same shit on Equius, but nooo, he barely fuckin’ touched him…”

“Gamzee’s angry, not stupid, and he assures me he’s not suicidal.”

“Are you sure you can’t stop him?”

“If I could, I still wouldn’t. I’m not your fucking auspistice, and I’m not inclined to be charitable anyway.”

“Wwell fuck you too,” Eridan snarled. “I shoulda just stayed with the fleet. I was happy there till you screwed everyfin up!”

“‘Happy’? You pissed off the wrong person and wound up under block-arrest while being investigated for theft and unlawful prostitution! If we hadn’t got you out of there you’d be dead!”

“At least it wwoulda been quicker than Gam’s gonna do it!”

Karkat rolled his eyes. “Fine, I’ll talk to him. Gamzee!”

Gamzee looked round at the mention of his name. “What?”

“If you make the fish bleed, you have to mop it up.”

“He’s damn well not cleanin’ up where I’m bleedin’ from now!” Eridan shielded his groin and glared at Gamzee. “I hate you so much.”

“It could have been worse, brinesucker,” Gamzee hissed, pointing to his facial scars. “Howsabout I make you smile this way instead?”

Eridan backed away slowly, trembling.
Gamzee couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept. Really slept, not passed out, or dozed for a couple of minutes before jerking awake in terror. They’d been on the ship three weeks now, and every one of the days had mostly been spent lying awake, staring at the ceiling or watching Karkat sleep. Adorable as his little palebro was when he snored, that didn’t really help the dizzy, queasy feeling that was setting in. Gamzee hadn’t dared sleep, but he was now prepared to risk it. Hivemind or memory nightmares, whatever came into his head couldn’t be worse than dying from lack of sleep, and he’d faced hell before and got through it, so he had no reason to be afraid of imaginary monsters now.

He curled up in the corner, out of the way, as Karkat and Sollux spread charts over the control panel and bickered amicably over them. Friendly voices in the background would help. He clung stubbornly to his two newly-acquired plushies, not caring that he could be seen; nobody would have a worse opinion of him than they did already because of that. He yawned and closed his eyes, as near to content as he had been in months. Yeah, this might make him feel better.

“Highbl- Makara? Is it appropriate for me to call you that?”

One very angry purple eye opened.

“Zahhak. Either you’re here to tell me the ship’s on motherfucking fire for real, or you’re going to go the fuck away.”

“I-I apologise for disturbing you. I was wondering if I might take a moment of your time, to attempt an apology for what I said.”

“You’ve motherfuckin’ wasted a minute, I still ain’t accepting, now motherfucking get on to another part and send yourself away from my motherfucking sight.”

“Please, let me at least try to apologise. I understand my error did cause you grief.” Equius tried his best to stay cordial, though he was pretty sure Gamzee was swearing more than normal just to get under his skin. Attempting to stave off any frustration with the purpleblooded troll was difficult enough, without the added bonus of his perverted use of words.

Gamzee sighed. “Fine, make it quick.” Was enough time alone to sleep too much to ask for, or at least a break? His head wasn’t enough there to really tell Equius all his thoughts, or try to engage him in a fight. He just wanted to sleep. The pause between them spread out long and was getting unbearable. “Well, you gonna speak, motherfucker, or just stare at me more?”

“Forgive me, I was collecting my words. I understand your anger. I also understand that my words did nothing to help you. For that I apologise. However,” Equius took a breath, “you must understand, even on your best days, I have a hard time understanding you. I think some type of remedial course might be necessary for you to type with any coherence. I didn’t understand what you were implying, and I feel as if it is unfair for you to react so badly to that.”

Gamzee raised an eyebrow, moving his arms so the plushies stayed on the ground but he could pull himself up to better look at the blueblooded troll. Was Equius kidding? When there was another length of silence that gated on his nerves. Gamzee nodded. “Alright, and?”

“It’s not entirely my fault for what I said. Since I couldn’t understand you I could only assume what you needed assistance with.” Gamzee let his weight sag on his arms. He held in shaking his head,
and just laying back down to ignore the other troll. “In the moment I could only assume it would be something you wanted, since it would have been an honor. I know now, that it was not. I’m not implying that it was, I’m saying it would have been. Honestly, I apologise for the pain my error in words caused. All of this is so overly complicated for no true reason I can see. Perhaps, a bit of the circumstance is my error.” Equius took a moment to breathe, though it was obvious his thought wasn’t done. “You see, Makara, all three of us, Ampora, you, and myself had our own set of challenges with conscription. Like Ampora, loath as I am to admit it, I had my own set of outside influences. I had been stressing out, and working overtime to prove my worth, and to get to what I wanted to do. I’m sure you can understand. I never really had extra time, and I was a bit distracted when we spoke, I was in the middle of work.” Equius shrugged.

“So,” Gamzee said slowly. “Let me make sure I’m being wrapping this up in understanding right. You were too busy to--”

“It wasn’t that I was too busy, it is that I was distracted. Conscription was extremely difficult. Full of surprises, but very hard. It was as if I was constantly pulled in many directions. I, unlike Ampora, was not cowering in my block from any type of allegation. Instead, I was constantly busy, trying to keep my strength about myself, trying to get the work assigned completed in time, on top of extra practice to make sure I could still shoot once my medical training was done. My mentor wasn’t ruthless, but he had a high level of expectation, and he was quite fond of singling me out. I do not know if it was because he expected me to continue to better myself, or if he he found something about me amusing. It was difficult, and I’m sure you can understand that. As I said, I was distracted. I bet you are quite exhausted of hearing that. Though I know you understand that the universe doesn’t drop everything for you, as you are not the only creature in its domain. You can’t expect that when you spoke with us that we would have dropped everything.”

“No, I’m understanding you loud and clear motherfucker. Now, if you can’t get into any motherfucking mind. I need to sleep, or try so if you can just vanish and get gone that would be great.”

“I’m surprised you’re accepting this apology so easily.”

“I never said shit about accepting any of your poison words. I got better motherfucking sense in my mind then to be listening to your motherfucking excuses. I just am done humoring your little words, and having you think anyone will give any care to your hopeless speak. I still ain’t full of any type of accepting. Now get the motherfuck away from me.”

“Honestly, Makara, I understand that you’re suffering but being rude is hardly going to help.”

Gamzee barked out a laugh, and was on his feet in one smooth motion. “Don’t you fucking get it? I don’t care why you didn’t help. I don’t need your motherfucking excuses. I already know you didn’t help because you’re a fucking moron. THIS IS NOT MOTHERFUCKING ABOUT YOU!”

“I never said this was about me. I was merely apologising. If you’re not going to accept it that is acceptable. It’s your choice, however rudeness will not be tolerated.”

“Then, before I get any ruder, GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME.”

Equius barely contained his snarl at Gamzee. He shook his head and sighed. “Then if you are going to be that way, I’ll leave you be. For the record, it’s much better to ask for what you want then yell at someone to do it.” Equius moved away from the purpleblooded troll, not looking back, though he could feel Gamzee’s eyes follow him as he moved to another portion of the room.

Gamzee was nearly panting, his head aching, and he just wanted to sleep. Now it seemed like that
was going to be an impossibility. Nervous energy was skittering along his limbs. Gamzee would have cried in frustration if it would have helped and didn’t make his head hurt any more. He had learned that lesson a few times; crying didn’t help, nor did it do anything to improve a headache.

He could hear Equius speak to Sollux, and he couldn’t stop the way his whole body twitched. He looked to the blueblooded troll. Even if he and Sollux had worked together beforehand Gamzee could still see traces of that condescending look in Equius’ eyes, one that said he was speaking to someone lower than himself. His fists balled at his sides.

“Equius.” He tried to keep his voice steady, though he could hear it shake, the dark half of himself inching toward the surface and clawing at his vocal chords. He took a breath, as the group Equius was speaking to looked towards him. Karkat looked worried. Sollux’s eyebrow was arched, and Equius just looked confused. Gamzee fought a smirk as the words came to him immediately. "Strife with me."

Every troll in the room went quiet and looked towards them. Gamzee hadn’t even noticed when all of them arrived. Maybe he got a little sleep and just missed it. That counted. More sleep could wait.

"What?"

"If you don't fight back I'm gonna motherfucking kill you whether I mean to or not. I order you to strife with me."

Eridan turned tail and ran, and the group heard the storage block door slam. Equius ignored him, not breaking eye contact with Gamzee.

“Not in here!” Sollux shouted, trying to keep the pleading tone out of his voice. “You’ll break thomething!”

“Then where else could you be motherfucking thinking both of us could be doing this motherfucking business?” Gamzee said, not pulling his stare away from Equius. “Also, then all you being sure that no one ends up dead, ain’t that the motherfucking bargain?”

“I’m theriouth, GZ, if you break anything here we’re thcrewed. You could alwayth vacate ED from thtorage, or use one of the bunk blockth. But not next to the equipment that ith keeping uth going in the away directhion from the empire.”

“Hi—... Ga—... Makara,” Equius said, “I will follow you where you wish to fight.” The purpleblooded troll’s mouth curled into a half-hearted, but fully evil smile. “Captor does have a point. However, we must be slightly careful, neither of us need to break through the ship. On the list of deaths I could have, imploding has never been high on it.”

“Sure, sure.” Gamzee licked his stubby fangs until they gleamed. “No sense in anyone else ending up dead.” Eyes still on Equius, he moved carefully towards the door. “Bunk block? Nothing too motherfucking breakable in there.”

“Just bunks,” Equius said, following Gamzee’s lead towards the door. The other trolls on the flight deck looked at each other. They had half-expected Equius to refuse, or Gamzee to chicken out, but there they were leaving, to go fight. Karkat looked at Nepeta.

“We should probably be at the ready, just in case. Those two might actually break a wall or something.”

Gamzee backed into the bunkblock, tense and prepared to lunge or dodge, until his spine pressed against the wall. Equius stood in the doorway, unmoving, glaring, as the others gathered at a safe
distance down the corridor.

“Your move, high- Makara.”

Gamzee looked him up and down, checking for weak spots. He took a step forward, then another, then ran and launched himself claws-first at the blueblood’s eyes. The movement was sudden, but not fast enough Equius couldn’t slide to the side and dodge the blow. Gamzee growled and turned so he could face Equius. He shifted enough to look like he was going to lunge again, watching as Equius’ posture tensed, readying himself for the dodge.

“Are you just going to toy with me, or are you going to fight?” Equius asked slowly.

Gamzee held in another growl. “I don’t give up on fighting so easily. I’ll be doing it, just motherfucking watching you.”

“I understand, no need to rush. No doubt the extra time is crucial for you to understand what’s going on.”

Gamzee lunged, his claws not truly sharp but still they made little cuts along Equius’ cheek, just an inch shy of his eye, before he smacked Gamzee’s hand away. The purpleblooded troll didn’t stop, bringing his leg forward and slamming his knee into Equius’ stomach. It hurt Gamzee as much as it hurt Equius, but the sudden gasp of air and Equius’ now doubled-over posture was a fitting reward to the throbbing in his knee.

Equius swiped, landing an open palm on Gamzee’s still sore ribs. It didn’t hurt as much as Gamzee would have expected it to. Still, he could feel his breath get caught, and another hit landed on his diaphragm. Not a fist, just open-handed slaps that stung more than throbbed. Painful as it was, Equius was restraining himself; he’d learned better control, thanks to Nepeta. If he had been going all-out, Gamzee would already have been dead.

Gamzee ignored the pain and slammed his fist against Equius’ cheek. His hand lit up in agony, but Equius apparently felt it just as much. The blueblooded troll was touching his cheek, looking shocked. Gamzee took it as an opportunity, deciding that the pain his fists might feel would be worth it. His claws didn’t do much damage, they were too short to truly hurt. He kept hitting, scratching, and if Equius was close enough he’d snap his jaw attempting to bite the other troll.

Equius looked and acted truly confused by the way Gamzee fought. It wasn’t a strife to alleviate anger. It was a strife without honor. It was a fight to injure another. Equius tried to keep his head about him, unwilling to truly hurt Gamzee. Instead, he wanted to allow the highblood a proper venue to alleviate his stress. But Gamzee’s intent, and lack of making this seem as if it was safe, was getting to him.

Gamzee grabbed onto Equius’ horns, jamming his knee into the blueblood’s diaphragm, causing his breath to come out in a painful hiss. Gamzee had a smile then, a hollow one, a mocking one. “You know what, Equius? Do you suppose I should just motherfucking off you?”

“You wouldn’t, this ship still needs me.”

“Sollux can cover what you haven’t all fixed yet.” Equius shook his head, a legitimate fist landing on Gamzee’s thigh, though Equius wasn’t so worked up that he’d actually break Gamzee’s leg. The purpleblooded troll barely doubled over. “Or I could make you all kinds of tolerable. Hoodoo you into the pits of oblivion. Make you a little puppet. Works well on bluebloods I hear. They like being little marionettes of the the higher castes.”
For the first time Equius heard Gamzee say the phrase “higher castes” as if it meant something.
Equius would have assumed he would have been elated on this day; instead it made his stomach roll
in discomfort. He had to physically shake himself to rid himself of the feeling. Gamzee was right, it
was an honor to serve the higher castes...

He made his displeasure known by giving Gamzee another open-handed slap against the stomach. It
wasn’t as bad as if he had punched him, but now Gamzee hissed out air. “I don’t particularly wish to
be your puppet, highblood.” Gamzee growled, and if Equius thought he fought without honor
before, this was something far deeper. Gamzee looked almost feral as he jumped onto Equius’ chest.
The surprise was enough to knock the blueblooded troll into the wall behind him, the metal bending
under his weight, threatening to break with every punch Gamzee delivered to Equius’ face.

“What did I say?” Each word was punctuated with a fist. “DON’T MOTHERFUCKING CALL
ME THAT. Is that too difficult to understand? YOU MOTHERFUCKING PIECE OF SHIT.” It
took Equius a moment to get his senses about him and begin to defend, though he could already feel
his cheek, eye, and nose swelling, blue blood dripping from his eyebrow and splattering on the
purpleblood’s own bleeding knuckles. “I’ll motherfucking kill you. MOTHERFUCKING FUCK
UP YOUR MOTHERFUCKING SHIT. Make you beg for death. PLEAD FOR IT. Beg me on
your hands and knees.”

Equius raised a hand and slapped Gamzee across the face, the force making Gamzee nearly fly off
his place on Equius’ chest and slam against the empty bunks. It took the purpleblood only a moment
before was on all fours, growling. Gamzee turned slowly to face Equius from his position on the
floor. Poised, in a position Equius’ recognized from Nepeta. Gamzee was prepared to pounce.

“AIN’T THAT WHAT YOU WANT? To crawl on your hands and knees in front of me.
MOTHERFUCKING PROSTRATED LIKE THE WORTHLESS MOTHERFUCKING SHIT
YOU ARE. Do I got to find something to motherfucking motivate you to kneel?” Gamzee’s eyes
flashed towards the door, and Equius felt his blood boil. “OR WILL YOU JUST KNEEL,
MOTHERFUCKER?”

“I wouldn’t kneel to a desperate pathetic wriggler throwing a narcissistic tantrum because he couldn’t
fend off one or two trolls.”

Gamzee growled and lunged and Equius grabbed his wrist, clutching onto it tightly, and glared at
Gamzee. It wouldn’t be too hard to teach him a lesson; quite out of rank, but it would be simple. He
just needed to apply a bit more pressure.

“You would have been invaluable to the Empire. BUT WHY DON’T YOU TRY ANOTHER JOB
ON?” Gamzee hissed. Equius could see the worry in the purpleblood’s eyes. “Go fucking kill
yourself.”

“Not all of us are as worthless as you. I have better things to do then listen to your poor
psychological game. Are we finished?” Gamzee growled, pushing himself closer to Equius twisting
his left wrist uncomfortably in the blueblood’s grip, the bones grinding again.

“I WANT TO CUT CHUNKS OUT OF YOUR FACE. Make your moirail cook and eat them.
WHILE YOU’RE STILL BREATHING AND FUCKING WATCHING.”

“Leave Nepeta out of our petty squabbles.” Equius added more pressure and he watched Gamzee
flinch. “If you’re angry with me then I’ll allow it. She is an innocent.” Gamzee pressed closer, and
Equius couldn’t help the discomfort it created. “Just because you are a deplorable wriggler who
should have probably been culled doesn’t mean you get a free ride to be rude to everyone here.
You’re a miserable excuse for troll, and if I didn’t respect Vantas in any measure I would kill you
without remorse. You intolerable, repulsive sack of skin. If I hadn’t seen the scars I would assume you lied about the whole thing for attention. Then again you might have given them to yourself. Desperate as you are.”

“I want you to hurt like you made me hurt.” Gamzee whispered. Equius couldn’t help but feel like a sudden stranger to this conversation, though he knew that Gamzee was speaking to him. “I’LL MAKE YOU MOTHERFUCKING SUFFER.” Gamzee twisted his other arm and slammed his thumb into Equius’ eye. In desperation Equius released Gamzee and kicked the purpleblood away from him. Luckily Gamzee had missed his glasses and instead went under them.

Gamzee attempted to dodge back, tripping over his own feet, breathing labored as the back of his head hit the floor, his head fuzzy for only a moment before he let out a gasp as Equius’ foot landed on his stomach. Gamzee’s sad excuses for claws curled around Equius’ ankle and tore into flesh, aiming for ligaments. Not deep enough for long term damage, even if that’s what he wanted.

He tried to st up, and couldn’t. Equius’ hands were huge, and Gamzee’s neck was now pinned to the floor by one, pressure gradually increasing. He reached up and clawed frantically at the hand until lukewarm blue trickled over his throat, but couldn’t move it. Equius was breathing hard, sweat pattering onto Gamzee’s face as the blueblood loomed over him. “Are you finished now?”

Gamzee only redoubled his efforts. He was back on the subjugglator ship, pinned again, about to be torn open, helpless. In his eyes blue turned to purple and the angry glare became a lustful grin. Someone was screaming; from the pain in his throat, it might have been himself.

“So! Equius, please, stop!”

A girl’s voice, shrill and frightened. Gamzee tried to place it. Oxygen rapidly disappearing from his head, he spluttered out the first name that came to mind.

“L-Laneen?”

Then the pressure was off his neck, Equius was standing up and looking at his bleeding hands as if they had come to life and strangled Gamzee on their own. Nepeta was leaning over Gamzee; it was she who had spoken, not the ghost. His throat felt on fire, and his chest and stomach were churning horribly.

“Gamzee?” Nepeta asked slowly, Karkat’s face appearing right beside hers.

“Are you okay?” Karkat asked. Gamzee tried to nod, but that just made his head feel even lighter. Instead, he settled for blinking at Karkat. He watched Karkat look over to Nepeta, and then back to Equius. “He said strife, not kill.”

“I had no intention of killing him.” Equius’ voice tried to sound stable but he couldn’t get rid of the shaking. “I really had no intention.”

“Could have fooled me. If Nepeta hadn’t yelled when she did, he would be dead.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have been...” Equius’ voice was still shaking. “He’s obviously quite resilient.”

Karkat stared at Equius. “Are you being serious right now? Because I can’t honestly tell if that comment was serious or a hilariously poor attempt at lightening the mood. I’m pretty sure you’re still the moronic spongedead primitive pustulefuck I know and am somehow semi-friends with, meaning you’re serious. Equius, just stop, you’re being excessively cruel. Gamzee, can you ta-- I mean are you okay?” Karkat bit his lip, proud of himself for catching his error of words before he freaked the other troll out more. Gamzee growled, pushing himself upright and lunging at Equius.
quickly grabbed the taller troll’s shoulders. “Nepeta just stopped him from killing you. Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“I’m fine,” Gamzee responded automatically, voice shaking enough to make it clear this wasn’t true.

"I wasn't trying to kill you, really," Equius repeated, not meeting Gamzee's eyes.

"'Course not. Planning to get some use outta me first?" Gamzee blurted out.

Equius looked up at that, eyes blazing behind his cracked glasses. "Excuse me? Which one of us has been inappropriately touching our shipmates?"

“I saw what looks you been giving at me,” Gamzee hissed. Karkat’s grip tightened on Gamzee and he looked at Equius. Nepeta grabbed onto Equius’ wrist. “Who is the fucking desperate one now? I mean, motherfuck, you needed me to motherfucking order you around just so you could get off. I shoulda expected that you’d motherfucking’ continue to be just as pathetic as you have always been making at. Difference between my ‘inappropriate touching’ and yours is I wouldn’t do more. You would.”

“Your obvious desperate need for attention aside,” Equius said, pulling his hand away from Nepeta and crossing his arms, “strifing with you doesn’t mean I want to engage in any other activity with you. Nor does any troll touching you mean that they would want anything like that from you. You’re...” Equius caught his anger before he said anything more that he’d regret later. One of them had to be the saner troll here.

“Finish your thought, motherfucker.” Gamzee was glaring, but not moving to break Karkat’s hold on him. “Finish your goddamn thought. There has to be more to that. I pissed you off enough yet that everyone here can see your real colors? How when it all breaks down you’ll crawl back to them, begging to kiss their feet? Your kind was made to be ruled. Not good for much motherfucking else.” Karkat glared at Gamzee and the purpleblood sighed. “Fine, motherfucker, fine, not your kind, you. You alone, were made to crawl around after them like a wriggler fresh out the caverns wishin’ for a lusus. When they motherfucking get us, you’ll get a chance, they love wrigglers. I’d tell them how much you’d motherfuckin’ love it. Give my motherfucking nook a damn break from them. What all you wanted, all along. You’d be making to serve at your place.”

“Makara,” Equius said slowly. “I’m going to let you continue to rant. When you’re like this no one can take you seriously.”

Karkat squeezed Gamzee’s hand as hard as he could; he couldn’t physically hold Gamzee back, but the pressure helped keep Gamzee in the moment, thinking something approaching rationally. He squeezed back, Karkat wincing as his bones ground together in the powerful grip. Gamzee kept glaring daggers at Equius as the blueblood retreated.

Equius stopped in the doorway as he realised Nepeta wasn’t following him. “Nepeta?”

Nepeta stopped watching Gamzee and Karkat as if they were an unexploded bomb and blinked at Equius. “Eh? Oh. Sorry. Uh, can you handle your wounds yourself? I think I need a moment alone.”

Equius looked crestfallen, but nodded. Gamzee was surprised enough not to spit out a vicious comment as the two left the room and went their separate ways, leaving him and Karkat alone.

“I didn’t mean what I said,” Gamzee mumbled. “I was just angry and I wanted to get my hurt at him.”

“I know, you always get fuck-all stupid when you’re mad. You wouldn’t need me if that weren’t the
case. My righteous fucking pain in the waste chute.” Karkat looked over to Gamzee. “Are you alright?”

Gamzee shrugged. “Don’t matter nothing to me. Survived worse, don’t really care about getting hurt no fuckin’ more. It’s just a body.”

“You can’t --” Karkat cut himself off with a shake of his head. “Fine... Who is Laneen? Or why did you say that name?” Gamzee stared for a moment, before nodding for no particular reason.

“I’ll talk to you ‘bout her some day. Motherfucking now, I just want to curl up somewhere and talk about other things. Care to be going back somewhere private and getting our chat all up and wickedly on about random and not related at this shit?”

Karkat nodded and took a step before the taller troll followed him to the bunkblock. Karkat might be able to check to see if any bones were broken, if he got Gamzee comfortable enough. He might also have a chance to tell him off about not caring about his body and if it was injured.

~~~

Equius, having bandaged his hands himself and turned the first-aid box over to Tavros to deliver to Karkat, found Nepeta curled up in the alcove beside the crawlspace hatch, with the red paint can Vriska and Eridan had found. She was finger-painting on the floor, drawing what appeared to be a large troll with spiky hair, stuck through with numerous sharp objects of various types. The painted troll was too bulky to be Gamzee, and the zigzag mouth representing the Grand Highblood’s facepaint design confirmed who it was supposed to be.

“Nepeta, what are you doing here?” Equius cleared his throat. “It’s almost time for us to eat, and it would be good if we were there early enough to not get the bottom of the pot.” He looked at her painting. “What are you drawing?”

“Just taking out some stress,” she said, slapping her fingers down on the floor and pulling the mark into a suitable depiction of a blood splatter. “Pity I don’t have any purple paint.”

“I see.” Equius looked over the painting once more. “It is a terrible situation, unfortunate in both what happened and how it’s being handled. But we’ll get through.”

“You made it worse!”

“Nepeta!” Equius couldn’t hide his surprise. “What do you mean? I didn’t intend for it to be worse. I assumed that--”

“Why didn’t you just listen? I know he wasn’t your best friend, or anything close. But what if it was me, what if I told you that my mentor was doing that? Would you have told me to serve my place?”

“Th-that’s different...” Equius said lamely, following it up with a muttered “I would have less excuse for not being able to comprehend your typing.”

“Do you think this is funny? Argh!” Nepeta clutched her horns in despair. “You are so self-centred! I can’t believe you didn’t learn your lesson after what you did to Aradia! At least you had the excuse of being six sweeps old and stupid then, and she took the chip out before anything actually happened! Trolls you happen to outrank are still trolls, and neither the ones above or below you deserve this!”

“Do you think I’m happy he got hurt? Is that it?” Equius’ voice was starting to increase in volume along with Nepeta’s.
“Yes! Yes, that’s exactly what I think! You did message him every day for sweeps to tell him how much you hated him while refusing to make any official black advances, maybe I was wrong and you really did just want him dead!”

“I wanted him to act in a manner befitting his station!”

“And look where it got him when he did!”

“How was I to know where that would lead him? How was I supposed to know that he would be hurt like that? I assumed that it would be mutual, and in some type of kindness, not whatever that was. Had my assumption been correct, we wouldn’t be here discussing this. I was wrong, and I am not happy he got hurt.”

“I think you’re more upset that he’s not just dropping it. Or maybe you’re just jealous that he got that kind of recognition, even if it turned out horribly, and you didn’t.”

Equius bristled. “That’s not the point! Nepeta, please. The social structure is not always a pleasant thing, but it is necessary that the higher-”

“Necessary?! You think that’s less of a terrible thing to say than thinking it’s funny? What was necessary about what that shitbag did? And don’t lecture me on my language!”

“No matter how irate you may be it doesn’t excuse your language. And yes, the hemospectrum, everything, is in place for a reason. It wouldn’t have stayed around for so long if it wasn’t necessary.”

“Ever think that maybe, just maybe, the only reason it’s stuck around is because it’s been enforced? Look at our group, Karkat isn’t even on the spectrum and he’s our leader. Not Feferi, not Eridan, not Gamzee, or yourself. Instead it’s Karkat, then probably Aradia. The two ‘lowest’ bloods.”

“It’s enforced because society would fail without it. Look at us. We’re nearly starving on a tugship going to some obscure planet. I see nothing worth bragging about here. Vantas’ leadership leaves a lot to be desired. Let me make one thing clear, I’m not saying that the lowerbloods are worthless or bad, all I am saying is that the power structure is there for a reason. I wanted Gamzee, and all of us, to act appropriate to our designated station. All of us, I am not excluding myself from this rule.”

“You wouldn’t, and tell me, if we are supposed to act according to our station, why did you run with all of us when the Highblood made his threats? You didn’t stick around.” Nepeta let out a humorless laugh. “I can’t do this. I can’t sit here and pity you when you are blind to the horrors of the universe. Not just blind, but also defending them. With what you’re saying we should have all stayed and let them, the Highblood and the Empress, do whatever they wanted to us. You’re saying that we deserve nothing more than being tortured, subjected, and murdered. For no reason other than entertainment.”

“You can’t pity me anymore?... Wh-what are you saying?”

Nepeta stalked past him to the door. “I can’t handle this conversation anymore! I’m going to go see if Sollux wants to fuck,” she said, intentionally emphasising the curse. “Maybe that’ll help. I should at least keep one quadrant.”

Equius could do nothing but watch her retreat into the bunkblock.
“MAKARA, I’M GOING TO WRING YOUR SCRAWNY NECK!”

Tavros nearly jumped out of his skin, knocking the first-aid box over, and Karkat gaped at Gamzee. “What the fuck did you do this time?”

“Nothing!” Gamzee protested truthfully. “I’ve been in here with you for the past hour, I don’t know what he wants…”

Equius appeared in the doorway and stamped towards Gamzee, the veins in his neck popping. Gamzee tensed, ready to fight, and Karkat moved to shield him.

“Whoa, Zahhak, what happened?”

Equius clenched his teeth and grated out “Nepeta has left me.”

“What?” Gamzee was shocked. “Why’d she do a thing like that?”

“Don’t give me that, Makara, you know perfectly well why she would! Apparently your idiocy is worth more to her than our relationship!”

“Motherfucker, I don’t know why she’d up and leave you unless her pity all up and left. I ain’t got nothing to do with that.” Gamzee’s voice was hardly above a growl, but it hadn’t descended into the pitch-shifting volume fuckery that meant he had gone off the deep end. Equius’ eyes flashed to Karkat.

“Move, mutant.”

“Don’t you fuckin’ talk at him like that.”

“Gamzee,” Karkat said, pressing back making sure the purpleblooded troll didn’t lunge to attack.

“I said move, this doesn’t concern you. I will not hesitate to hurt you if you do not move. This is Makara’s fight, and if he can’t stand on his own… it proves to me the troll he is.”

Karkat shrugged, and looked Equius in the eye. “Hurt me, then.”

“What?”

Tavros bit his lip, looked at the standoff, and joined Karkat. “Me too. I mean, if you want to hurt Gamzee, you, uhh, have to get past me.”

Equius looked at his fists, then at Karkat and Tavros, and said, a little more softly, “Vantas, Nitram, I don’t want to drag you into this. I am still angry, I don’t know if I can control my strength sufficiently not to cause you severe damage.”

“Then don’t control it!” Karkat goaded. “Kill us. If you really think social standing is so fucking important that what happened to Gamzee was okay, why have you let a pair of mutants live this long?”

“I’m not saying that. I’m say-”

“Yes, you are,” Tavros said, his voice less shaky than usual. “That’s what you’ve always been
saying.”

“If Nepeta left you, it’s her choice and her feelings. Gamzee had nothing to do with it.”

Equius shook his head. “Both of you need to move. It is his fault, if he would just grow up and stop caring about that happened all of this would be over by now.”

“How is that easy?” Karkat asked softly. “Do you think any troll can just ‘get over’ anything? Especially something like this? Nepeta left you because you didn’t stand up and help your friend when he needed it. We’ve heard all three versions of that conversation. All of us are able to pick out what happened by what crossed over. All of you honestly admitted that neither you nor Eridan really helped the situation. But I agree, Gamzee is being a little harsh. I’m trying, Tavros is trying, fuck we’re all trying to make that less likely. Don’t blame him for your mistakes.”

“My mistake was assuming he had more than one brain cell that wasn’t killed with his disgusting desire for sopor. That he understood what was happening and just needed assistance or assurance that he wasn’t misreading intentions. I assumed that from what Makara described that it was glaringly obvious what his ancestor’s intentions were. My shortcoming and failure was I was unable to understand him.”

“In what world does anyone want to pail someone double their height? Or even, someone proven around the empire to be fickle and violent. Or even more simply, when they keep saying it feels wrong.” Karkat drew himself up, still pitifully short in comparison, but the action said enough.

“I’ll admit,” Tavros said, “that if… Gamzee would have told me what he told you, I would have had a hard time believing it, but if my friend said what was happening was wrong. I’d at least tell them what might happen. That way they could, uhh, be prepared for it. I’d also mention it as one of the first, um, things when I was around people trying to rescue him.”

“That’s inconsequential information. What happened happened, and we should move on already. Now move, I just want to speak with him.”

“By speak you mean hit. And I’m not going to let that happen.”

“Neither am I. Go on ahead. You can, uhh, push us out of the way. Once that’s done, why don’t you be the Empire’s, um, little hero and turn this ship around, you can turn all of us in. I’m pretty sure they’d, uhh, thank you for it in a lot of ways.”

Equius was blinking rapidly behind his glasses, sweat beading on his brow. “I-I don’t… darn it, Nitram, I was starting to like you! Why are you making this so hard? I don’t want…”

“Yes, you do,” Gamzee hissed, a wicked grin spreading on his face. “Come on. Do what you always MOTHERFUCKING WANTED.”

Nepeta chose this unfortunate moment to enter the room, clothes and hair rumpled from her interrupted tryst. “What’s going-”

Gamzee moved like lightning, and his claws were at her throat. Everyone froze. This wasn’t on the level of a punch or kick; his claws were sharp enough again, and blood was already beading on her skin. His mouth spread into a broad, terrifying grin.

“See, you love my blood so much, Zahhak, DOES THAT MEAN I CAN SPILL AS MUCH OF HERS AS I WANT?”

Three voices shouted in unison, all saying Gamzee’s name in some iteration. His claws just dug
down a little. He could feel a cold shudder run through his body. Nepeta looked up at him in worry, surprise, and he could nearly taste her fear. This, Gamzee decided, felt nice, this didn’t have complications. This was much better than the other shit he had been trying.

“Makara, stop this at once,” Equius growled moving over towards Gamzee.

“No, no no, you see… THIS LITTLE MOTHERFUCKING BUD. Just needs to be snipped. AIN’T RIGHT FOR A MOTHERFUCKING HIGHBLOOD LIKE YOU. To be getting all himself twisted around the fucking dregs. YOU WANT ME TO BE MOTHERFUCKING THAT? I can be that.”

“Gamzee,” Nepeta whimpered, the claws still against her throat, pleading for this to stop, looking into his eyes, but she couldn’t see anything that reminded her of her purpleblooded friend, nothing but bloodlust and anger. “Gamzee, stop, it’s okay. He’s not going to hurt anyone. He’s mad and you are too, just please take a breath, and a step back.”

Gamzee hunched down. “No, little kitty, that’s not how it goes. THIS MOTHERFUCKER WANTS ME TO EMBRACE MY BLOOD. I will, then, I can embrace that. IT’S MOTHERFUCKING DESTINY IS WHAT IT MOTHERFUCKING IS.”

“Gamzee!” Karkat nearly hopping up onto Gamzee’s back trying to pull the taller troll away. “You need to pull your claws away from her, come on, pull away, and calm down.” Gamzee fidgeted, and upon realizing that the smaller troll wouldn’t move he changed his balance so Karkat could just hang there.

Equius remained motionless, his eyes flicking from Gamzee to Nepeta to his own hands and back, his mind racing, weighing his options. He couldn’t simply attack; if he made the slightest wrong move, both Nepeta and Karkat could die, and Gamzee was weaker but faster than him. He certainly couldn’t talk his way out, if Gamzee wasn’t listening to his own moirail.

“Aw, I’m sorry. You PISSED OFF THAT I’M PLAYING WITH YOUR TOYS?” Equius moved forward slowly. He would have to extract Nepeta and get through this situation carefully. He didn’t want to kill anyone, just hurt them for not getting over things. To be honest, it would have been nice to actually really fight back. He wasn’t too sure if Gamzee would live through it, but it would make him feel a whole lot better. “Makara, listen to your moirail.”

“Ah shit bro. YOU ARE MOTHERFUCKING ANGRY. We could split her right down the middle.” Gamzee’s volume changes were terribly disorienting, but Equius didn’t miss his other set of claws moving up to press into Nepeta’s stomach. “YOU WANT ME TO DO IT VERTICAL? Or horizontal? Should by rights be across the waist so we each get at least one hole, BUT IT’S YOUR MOTHERFUCKING CHOICE MOTHERFUCKER. She’s the one who broke you up. WHY MOTHERFUCKING HURT ME. When you can take care of the source?”

“Makara, I don’t want you to hurt her.” Equius’ voice was soft. He was still creeping forward, trying to get close enough to pull Gamzee away from Nepeta, and hopefully not rip out her throat in the process. “I don’t want anyone but you hurt.”

Gamzee laughed. It echoed around the ship enough that it sounded distorted. “YOU LOVE IT THOUGH, ALL THIS HEMOCASTE BULLSHIT. Don’t you know, Equius, this is what it looks like? THIS IS ITS TRUE MOTHERFUCKING FACE. I’ll kill her, then just go through this ship, rip out everyone’s throat.”

Karkat was trying to get a good enough grip on Gamzee’s arm to pull it away from Nepeta, but
every time he got close Gamzee would shift, ruining his hold. Tavros was moving slowly towards Gamzee’s other side. Equius hoped that somehow they’d manage to pull him away before he killed Nepeta. Or he might end up killing one of them, or all of them.

“What I would love is for you to get over what happened to you.”

“I MOTHERFUCKING AM GETTING MY SHIT OVER IT, BROTHER. I’ll give into it, just become what I should have done from the start.”

Nepeta took a deep breath, extended her claws, and thrust upward, catching Gamzee in the jaw. His own claws tore open her skin as he jerked backwards, but only her skin, not her veins, and his grip loosened just enough for her to wriggle free. For good measure, she punched him in the gut, leaving him curled up and gasping, and ran. Not even glancing at Gamzee, Equius followed her.

Gamzee looked down at the floor, catching his breath, the words he spoke rolling around in his head. The rage was gone, and all of that heartlessness disappeared with it. He wanted to whine, or claw at himself, or do something other than keep thinking about what he said over and over again.

Karkat pressed his hand against the taller troll’s shoulder. It was slow, deliberate, and enough that Gamzee was sure that he wasn’t really angry, just peeved that his moirail snapped again. The sigh that came from the hotblooded troll shortly thereafter cemented the idea.

“You with us, Gamzee?”

“Yeah… I…” Gamzee pulled himself up to standing, looking down at the olive blood on his claws and fingers. “Fuck. Fuck, I cannot believe those motherfucking words came out of my mouth…”

“Better those words from your mouth than that bulge from your pants or any more of that blood from Nepeta.”

“I guess…” He wanted to ask what was coming over him, and taking over his mind, making events like this happen more often. He knew the answer so he didn’t ask, even if he did want someone to tell him that reason wasn’t the real one. “I didn’t mean it, I swear I didn’t… I wasn’t gonna… No, I can’t lie. I think I really was gonna kill her.”

Karkat and Tavros looked at the purpleblood, who was still looking down at his hands. It was obvious to both of them how much that revelation shook the other troll to his core. Karkat swallowed and extended a hand slowly. When he was met with no resistance he coiled his fingers around the taller troll’s hand.

“It’s not okay, but at least she managed to stop you. You need to get these rages under control. I know you’re fucked up, but you don’t need to drag yourself down to a skullnumbing new level of fucked-up reserved for a select few. The seventh circle of too fucked-up to tell the difference between seedflap and ass. The highest disgusting echelons of princely stupid…” Karkat shook his head. “Let’s get you totally calm, and talk about this rationally, okay? See if we can find out what fuckery decided to cut through all your powers of control, reasoning, and good judgement.”

“Y-Yeah. Okay. Maybe I should get some sleep first. I was trying to before… That’s been fucking my head up pretty bad. I think I’ll be able to talk after I get some motherfucking rest. I… Tell Nepeta I didn’t wanna do it but I think she should stay away from me, okay?”

Tavros took Gamzee’s other hand. “Sure.”

Karkat and Tavros led Gamzee carefully in the direction of the bunkblock in the opposite direction to the one Nepeta had run for, and both sat on the metal bunk beside him until he fell asleep.
“Nepeta!” Equius mopped at his brow with one hand and frantically looked around the sleeping quarters, sagging with relief when he saw a blue tail-tip protruding from under a bunk. “Nepeta, are you- I mean, how badly are you hurt?”

The room was silent for a long time. All except the very quiet sniffles from Nepeta. Equius would ask to console her, or for her to come out so he could let her know she wasn’t alone, but it seemed out of place and he didn’t want to upset her even more. He didn’t quite know why she was crying, and he felt hopelessly unable to assist her.

“Nepeta, I understand you don’t want to talk to me, but I want to help you. Are you still angry with me?”

A pause, and then Nepeta spoke very quietly. “AC can’t stay mad at CT. Is CT mad at her?”

“No! No, never.” Equius sat beside the bunk. “Are you… is AC still bleeding? CT has bandages.”

“Huh. You’re roleplaying?” Nepeta twisted around under the bunk, and he saw her face, wet with tears but smiling a little. “I don’t even remember the last time you did.”

“CT thinks odd sentence structure is a small price to pay to help AC.”

Nepeta giggled, and he couldn’t help but join her with a smile. Her hand emerged, fingers spread into a triangle, and he returned the gesture to form a perfect diamond. Slowly and carefully, she crawled out. The cut on her throat was already closing up. Equius decaptchalogued a cloth and antiseptic and dabbed gently at it, and she purred softly.

“I’m sorry, Nepeta.”

“I’m sorry too. I was mad at a lot of things, and when you came in I just started feeling worse. I never blamed you for what happened, but I just took what you said the worst possible way and let my tongue run away with me.”

Equius sighed. “Honestly, I think you were right. We’ve all been going through some… odd times, and I was being stubborn. I just wished things would work the way they always did.” He shook his head. “You were right. Torturing a youngling who trusted him, driving us from our homes - these are not the actions of a true highblood. If we have authority, we must also have responsibility, or at least we should.”

“That’s kind of sweet, in a weird way.” Nepeta cuddled up to him. “Pale again?”

“Of course, Nepeta, yes!” Very carefully, Equius rested his hand atop one of hers. “Don’t worry about Makara. I’ll make sure he never comes near you again.”

“Uh, about that… I have a plan of my own.”

“Nepeta,” Equius sighed. “It had better not be something that will get you hurt. I can’t let you get hurt again.”

“No, no, I purpromise it won’t be bad. I know you don’t want me hurt. I don’t want you to get hurt either. I don’t want any of us to get hurt. So the plan is to stop it.”

“I am pretty sure that Vantas would be upset if you killed Makara.” Equius was only half joking. He wasn’t sure what Nepeta’s plan was, but he basically figured that murder wasn’t on the list. He gave
“Equius,” Nepeta said smiling and shaking her head. “No, no… He and Eridan are having purroblems, and I know you… can take care of yourself. But if I can intervene between the both of them, then this trip will be alright, maybe not perfect, but better.”

“What? Oh no no no.” His eyes widened. “If you mean what I think you mean, let me remind you we are talking of the man who nearly slit your throat and threatened to… engage in inappropriate behaviour with your corpse. Is it really a good idea to do anything which means spending more time near him?”

“Yes! Gamzee was my friend, and I don’t think the old Gamzee is completely gone. I can’t easily subdue him without killing him, and nor can Eridan, but two of us could handle him if Karkat couldn’t help. If everything works out right, I will have backup and he’ll have another stabilising influence, so it’ll never happen again.”

“And if it works out wrong?”

“Then we can’t be worse off than we are already!” Nepeta shook her head. “Someone has to help them. If not me, then who?”

Equius’ eyes filled with tears, and his voice shook as he spoke. “Th-that’s what you said to me when we first…”

“Equius, I pity you a lot.” Nepeta gave a little smile. “This little lapse aside, I was just so angry. I’ve been stalking around and listening to what everyone is saying. It’s just depressing, I was trying to stay optimistic, but it’s hard when you’re the only one who is… But we’re all friends, we’ve spent so much time together through good and bad and I know we can get through this. We have to work for it, though… I want to help you, but I have to help others too.” Equius could plainly see tears in her eyes she was refusing to let fall.

“Nepeta….”

“I remember when I was having a hard time, it was around the time you were fixing up Aradia. You couldn’t be there for me like you once were because you were so busy. I didn’t tell anyone, but they could tell I was upset… Before you came back Karkat tried to cheer me up, even got Gamzee in on it. I had never seen so many cute kitty videos before then. Gamzee stayed up with me past dawn just talking to me about nothing so I didn’t feel alone. He told me to never tell you, he said he didn’t want you to get upset. Or how about how all of us rallied behind Tavros after Vriska happened? We didn’t ostracize her, she just had to regain trust… We’ve always pulled together and had to get through difficult things. This time is no different, I guess it is a bit, but it’s not too different.”

“He did just try to kill you.”

“When we first met you could have killed me. I don’t doubt you thought about it. I was a lowblood in your way.”

“I never wanted to kill you. Nepeta, I’m more concerned for your safety.”

“I’m concerned about everyone’s safety, Gamzee’s too. He’s done terrible things to punish himself or just because he can hurt himself. I don’t want any of us to die, we worked so hard to get all of us together again. Even if we start to lose the fight and all of us end up dead, we tried, we fought, and we died… All together. So, I’m going to step up and take responsibility.” Nepeta smiled a little bit. “Plus, even with this you still hate him. Eridan I don’t think does, and I don’t want you to have any
competition in Gamzee’s mind.”

Equius spluttered and wiped away sweat. “It’s not like that! Really, can we talk about something other than Makara for now? That was what caused the problem.”

“Sorry, sorry. Everything has sort of revolved around him and Karkat for a while.” Nepeta curled up and purred thoughtfully. “So how’s Drooly doing with the new rig?”

“If you mean Captor, it works better than we expected. Honestly, you can’t give him a new nickname every day, I keep losing track.” Equius smiled. “Oh, uh, does it bother you that I’m spending time with your kismesis?”

“No, of course not! Really, I think spending time with the warmbloods is good for you. Get to know us, we’re really nice.” She winked. “Besides, it’s purrobably better not to hate your moirail’s kismesis. Less competition. Of course that’s where the ashen quadrant can be a big help-”

“Okay, the conversation is heading dangerously close to the topic we agreed to avoid now.”

“Sorry.”
Chapter 19

When Gamzee finally slept, he knew one of three things could happen. Either he’d be plunged into hivemind nightmares, which he would have been fine with. Two, he could dream about his memories; he would rather have stabbed his eyes out with a spoon and eaten them than have that happen. Or three, he could wake up in pitch black bleeding all over the place. Which seemed to be the case.

Instead of standing he was sitting, but he knew where he was. Maybe distance didn’t matter. He was still trapped, still forced to deal with his bloodlink’s looming presence in the darkness. He really seriously hoped he’d never dream about this place again once he got out. He looked down to his arm, still skinned and covered in dry blood, the mark on his arm still bleeding all over the floor and his leg. He could taste blood in his mouth, and he had no doubt his face was bleeding as well, though he didn’t have the motivation to touch his cheeks.

He whimpered; this was exactly what he had been trying to avoid. That and any of his other dreams that could have happened. He was half afraid his ancestor would notice his presence there and somehow materialize and demand answers from him. He didn’t trust himself not to just be honest and hope it would be less painful when they found them.

The room (or the space, he still wasn’t sure if it was a room) did shift. Soon enough, two familiar faces were coming towards him. He didn’t want to brighten up at seeing them, but he did. Something in him felt guilty, but he couldn’t place if it was his previous actions - though he escaped, he had done things he wasn’t proud of - or if it was more recent.

“Laneen, Sennir?” he said, still trying to place his feelings.

“For the record, if money meant anything here you would have lost me a hundred caegars,” Laneen said. Gamzee could tell by the tone of her voice that both of them were mad at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “What did I do?”

“First off, I will say thank you, and you are one lucky grub of a bitch. I really mean that, you are a grub of a bitch. You got out of there like it was no big deal. But…”

“Gamzee, those kind of threats are not funny. Both of us are disappointed in you.” Laneen was shaking her head at him. He understood exactly what he had been doing that made him have this terrible guilty feeling.

“Hey, I wasn’t really gonna-”

“You know full well what you were implying,” Laneen said sternly. “And dragging Nepeta in? As if you were not doing enough already? I would have thought you would know better than to say such a thing to anyone, and she did nothing to provoke you. The ancestors of everyone on this ship suffered at the hands of yours. Would you allow history to repeat itself?”

“Do I got a choice? I know what I’m growing into!”

“You always have a choice!”

“Really?” he said, standing up. Blood fell from his mouth as he spoke, dripping down his chin and onto the floor. “I’ve always had a choice? Sure, I had plenty of options and all of them have been shit. Do you know what it’s like? No, of course the both of you don’t. You didn’t get out of there
like I did. I don’t mean that to hurt, but you don’t understand what the right here and now is like for me.”

“You’re alive, that’s more than any of us can say,” Sennir said quickly, obviously defensive. “Are you about to whine at us about living when all of tried desperately and failed at their hands or our own?” Sennir snorted in laughter. “I think any of us would envy your ability to be alive, and your escape.”

“I’m alive in shades. I don’t sleep because I’m afraid to dream. I can’t even look at myself, with or without clothes on. I feel like a monster. Sometimes, I swear I can hear his voice in my head.” Gamzee had to spit out the excess blood, he still felt like he could drown here. “No one can touch me without me nearly vomiting. If they say the wrong thing, it takes everything in me not to shut down, kill them, or run away. I’m not fucking alive, I’m breathing. Don’t tell me you’d envy this. I don’t envy your death, except in my weakest moments. Don’t motherfucking envy my life.”

“Gamzee, that does not mean you have to take it out on others.”

“I’m not taking it out on them. I’m giving them just what they asked for.” He growled, and both of the ghosts took a step back. Gamzee could see the fear in their eyes. His bloodpusher felt like it was about to collapse in his chest as he relaxed. He could feel it, feel how his presence was nearly identical to the one haunting them in the darkness. That made him angry and almost threw him into an endless circle of being so pissed off he was like his ancestor that he acted like him anyway…

“Then you’re no better than our Keeper,” Sennir growled, moving his hand away from his stomach. “If you think anyone asks for torture you’re even less of the troll we took you for. So thank you for getting us out of there. Now, fuck off. We already have to deal with one of him. I don’t want to have two.” He almost turned to walk away, but Laneen grabbed his arm.

“Sennir, please.”

“No, I refuse to have two of them. I told you he was going to be just like him. Unforgiving, evil, and something we should keep our distance from.” Sennir looked up at him, taking his wrist from Laneen’s grip. “You can rot with him as far as I’m concerned.”

Sennir moved to go, and in the darkness for a brief moment Gamzee could see the silhouettes of other trolls. He knew he couldn’t see all of them, there was no way he ever could. They didn’t trust him, they had every right not to. Laneen moved quickly and once again held onto Sennir’s wrist.

“I-I am not…” Gamzee stuttered, but couldn’t exactly get the words he wanted to out. He couldn’t prove them wrong, he was obviously going to travel that path. He could feel himself turning into his bloodlink.

“Yes, you are.” Laneen turned back to him, still holding on to Sennir. He could see the disappointment in her eyes. “Your actions are no better than his.” Gamzee froze. He felt like his insides were falling apart. He wanted to scream or cry but he couldn’t find it in him to do so. He just felt so empty. “No, we do not understand, but when we offered you choices you had to be aware there were repercussions and other feelings that would occur depending on your choice.”

“So, I’m even more of a monster, huh?” Gamzee said softly. “Sometimes his voice is in my head, it doesn’t sound just like him but it’s close enough. It’s like a need, one I can’t ever explain to no one. You guys don’t even get it, neither does Karkat. It’s like there is something in me, something that wants to hurt all of them. See them bleed, to own their blood as mine. I try to keep it away, but it’s so hard, I’m tired of fighting it. If I’m just like him, maybe I should just give in.”
“Gamzee, that is not what we’re asking you to do,” Laneen said quickly. She took a step forward, dragging Sennir with her. She wanted to comfort him, but wasn’t sure if she could. “We are asking you to do the opposite.”

“I want to help you, I want to cheer you on,” Sennir added with a sigh, turning back towards Gamzee. “But I can’t, not when you’re like this. If I wanted to be around him, I’d get closer to him here. There are other ways to deal with things, ones better than violence.” He shook his head and looked over to the silhouettes. “All of us want to root for you, you did more and got farther than any of us ever did. We’ve been with him for centuries.” He stayed where Laneen had stopped him. He looked ready to leave. Gamzee shook his head.

“Talk about it? I don’t want to, everytime I do it’s like I’m back there. Karkat forced me to shower, and he hid away and saw the words carved on to me.” Gamzee paused, trying not to go back to the memory. “I ended up hiding in the bathtub until he went away. You know how shitty that is, when you feel like you can’t even trust your moirail?” Sennir brought his hands together around his stomach. Obviously, the thought was enough to make him understand the kind of hurt Gamzee meant. Sennir opened his mouth but closed it, deciding that whatever he wanted to say wasn’t enough.

Gamzee shook his head and with a sad laugh continued his thought. “He started asking me about them, and I couldn’t help it, I was back and they were carving them all over again. When I came out of it, I was bleeding. I had clawed into them so they would bleed again. No wait, just the one, this one,” He said showing his bleeding arm. “I can’t forget long enough to talk about it. I’ve tried!”

“Gamzee.” Laneen came over and wrapped her arm, the best she could, around his shoulders. She pulled him close. She couldn’t understand, but she could see how much he was hurting. It took a moment but his arms wrapped around her. Gentle, soft, and he wanted to just stay like that for awhile. “You have to talk about it. Memories are like ghosts.”

“No matter how fucked up their death, they’re still beautiful?” Gamzee smiled slightly. Laneen turned her head away, her face quickly turning yellow.

“Don’t hit on her. This is hardly the time.” Though he was smiling just the smallest amount.

Gamzee pulled back slightly and looked between the both of them. He turned his head to the darkness. “That’s not all this is, I mean, motherfucker, I can’t shake any of what they said to me from my mind. I mean, I’m going back to shit that should no longer be holding any motherfucking relevance, what if some part of me did fucking want it? That’d explain why my fucking body decided it was fan-fucking-tastic. I mean, shit. I’m obviously fucked up more because I couldn’t even be normal and hate it when he’d fuck me. Instead I usually disliked it when it was her. Maybe I just got jackall with my motherfucking mind and body. I don’t even motherfucking know, all I know is it’s motherfucking pathetic.”

“Hey,” Sennir nearly growled. “It’s not pathetic to feel any different. And fuck you for thinking that, and thinking that it makes you any less of the shit you already are. Tru—”

“Sennir, this is not the time. But you are right.” Laneen sighed. “Gamzee, you need to talk, get these thoughts out of your mind and share them with someone, lest you decide to lock them up and keep spiraling out of control. That is what you are doing. You are too afraid to face yourself, so you are hiding from it and letting the negative take over. That is their game, they want you to doubt yourself and rely on them.” Laneen’s shoulders drooped. “Trust both of us on that, no matter how we fought,
still they left you doubting, they plant those seeds inside you and it takes time to find all of them and get rid of them. You will be able to, though.”

“I won’t threaten them no more. I just feel so alone. I know the both of you understand the Cell, and my friends on the alive side understand that it was fucked up. I know both sides understand I need to heal. But I don’t know how. Talking just makes it worse, it… scares me.”

“There’s no shame in being afraid,” Sennir said, looking back and moving closer to both of them. “Do you think any of us met that or this situation without fear? I won’t even say I understand what it’s like to really escape. I didn’t get all the way out. I don’t know what it’s like to try to heal, outside of here. There really isn’t healing here, just acceptance. But you can’t allow our Keeper his victory.”

“What are you meaning?”

“If you turn into him, if you crack and become just like him, isn’t that letting him win?” Sennir put one of his hands on Gamzee’s forearm. The one that was stripped back to bone.

“I don’t have a choice, one day I’ll snap and I’ll turn into that. I don’t know how much the both of you know about ancestors…”

“I vaguely knew mine, if he really is mine… But, you can fight it every step of the way,” Laneen said softly. “We can help you fight it.”

“There is no law that says you’ll become your ancestor. I know I’m nothing like mine.” Sennir clutched onto his arm. It was meant to give Gamzee strength, but for some reason it just made him want to cry. “It’s just likely. That’s why we’re here to stop it from happening.”

“I don’t really want to, but can I just die, and not have to deal with it. You all are out of that cage. I don’t want to hurt them. Even Eridan and Equius. I wouldn’t actually do it. I wouldn’t even wish a fraction of what happened on them, even when I’m pissed off. I’m afraid I will hurt them, really hurt them one day.”

“No, that’s allowing him to win as well.” Sennir tried to smile. “Think about it, you are the first troll to really get out of their grasp. If you killed yourself they would assume you couldn’t handle it on the outside, that they influenced you so much you couldn’t live without them.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to act like him. I don’t want to be like him. Just it’s always there, right next to me. It sometimes cuddles up close and says such sweet things, and I get ahead of myself and I end up hurting them. It’s not like I lose myself to it, I’m conscious, just everything else seems to be overridden by it… I’m sure this doesn’t make any sense to either of you. I just don’t know how to make it become words anyone would understand.”

“It is okay, Gamzee,” Laneen said, giving him another squeeze. “My advice is, talk to Karkat. Start at the beginning, keep going until the end. You do not have to do it in one sitting, but go through all of it. Make sure he understands that everything that you are telling him is true. Even the bits about us. Ask him not to question. When you are scared and you want to get away. Remember that you are away from them.”

“It’s time you start something new. You don’t want them to define you for your whole life, do you? Don’t let yourself become either of them. Isn’t that one of the biggest insults, to not become your ancestor?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Gamzee, you can’t hurt your friends anymore,” Sennir added. “If you do, I cannot promise that the
Kin would welcome you. We have a tenuous enough balance with them when it comes to you. Some see you as another version of him. We are trying to fight for you. And you’re making it really difficult.”

“If you get angry just leave, get out of the situation.”

“It’s difficult though, I can’t control it.”

“You can learn, but you can not hurt them anymore. Threatening to use them or hurt them. Actually, hurting them makes you no better, and we can not allow it to continue.”

“I’ll do my best, but, I can feel it. It’s like a sickness.” Gamzee sighed. “Even if Karkat can help me now, what happens when he dies? Even if we do get away from the Empire and never get taken back, how long is he gonna live? Could be even shorter than a maroonblood, and how can I handle sweeps of this without him?”

“Forget about that for the moment. He’s alive now, he’s helping you now, and he’s not the only one.”

“We are trying to help you too. There is no way we could have ever honestly been friends in life, too much time between us and you. But we understand at least part of it. You have to let us, and let him help you. On top of that, you must see about helping yourself.”

Gamzee breathed deeply and blinked tears from his eyelashes, letting them trickle down. “Okay. I’ll try.”

“Good.” Sennir said. “Despite what I said earlier about you being really difficult and a stupid little shit. I want you to know that ninety-nine percent of us are behind you… Okay more like forty-five percent, but it sounds better when I say ninety-nine.”

“I doubt they will be.”

“Some said they would.” Gamzee pulled the back of his hand up to his eyes and wiped away the tears, just so his look of confusion could be better seen. “It’s time you knew more than us. When I was offered the choices, when Laneen was, we weren’t greeted by just two of us. I’ll admit we’ve been unfair to you.”

“No one was going to do it,” Laneen said softly, as if he was going to be angry. “They were going to allow you to be bound alone. In silence without anyone but them. I stood up for you. Sennir did what I said because that is what he does. But we were both greeted by a group.”

“I know you know we’re with you as ghosts, but I want you to know that we are rooting for you as much as we can in here without him finding out.”

“I could see if I could do that thing again, if it would make you guys more at ease.” Gamzee shrugged. “I might be able to, it was my psychics, I know how to use them now.”

Laneen gave him a little smile. “To be free of him even for a moment is a great way to bribe us.”

Sennir whistled at the darkness. Gamzee could feel the darkness move as if it was breathing, forms pulling from the bonds and passing from life to the crossroads just so they could speak. At first there was one body, then two, then three. Tears itched at his eyes again. He didn’t want to smile, it seemed inappropriate.

“Welcome to your other tribe, Gamzee,” Laneen said. “Thank you all,” she said, turning to the others
that had joined them. A taller blueblood slapping Sennir on the back with a smile. All Gamzee could see was even here there was friendship. A bunch of colors mingling around each other and not caring. In death, he supposed, they really were all equal. Especially here.

“You heeded my warning,” the blueblood said, coming further out of the darkness, enough Gamzee could see the marks that transcended death. “First troll to mostly heed it.”

“Aniuos,” Gamzee said. “I been remembering any name I could find. I’m pretty sure I got all them locked up in my head. Sorry, I didn’t heed it in full.”

“It’s no problem, not many do. Even I slipped up and in delusion drank.” He smiled and had a jovial laugh. Gamzee could almost see him as alive, he could look past the injuries. His legs were nothing more than bones. The shirt covering his torso covered how that trend carried on. One day Gamzee would ask.

“Still being good to motherfucking meet you.”

“This,” Aniuos said, pointing to a tiny maroon blood beside him, “is Ukuthe.”

She waved, her arm hovering somewhere close to her shoulder. Gamzee couldn’t take much more in about her other than that it was weird. Uncanny. He thought he would have been used to it by now. “We met, though I doubt you’d remember. I was the troll he bled out to paint you up. Funny thing is we can be bled dry over and over here.” Her voice sounded odder than Gamzee had been expecting.

“Sorry.”

“Not your fault.” She shrugged, her floating arm looking as if it was about to hit the floor any moment.

“My name’s KesKay,” Gamzee nearly jumped out of his skin. He turned, looking at a seadweller. She waved at him; both of her fins were nothing more than bone, and she was completely missing an arm. Gamzee wondered how that had happened. His cuts bled, his broken bones had the skin peeled back, apparently if your limb was ripped off it hovered next to you. To be missing one entirely… He’d have to ask later.

A smaller green blood boy nearly pounced on her shoulders. “Name’s Pyeran,” he said. Gamzee couldn’t outright see a lot of his wounds, though he was sure most of them were hidden behind KesKay. “Last one out. Not ‘cause there aren’t more that want t’ meet ya, but we don’t want t’ draw his attention. Don’t need him t’ show up an’ interrogate ya.”

“Thanking you for your kindness. I’m not being in the mood for interrogation.”

“So can you do it? Where you make light in here?” Ukuthe asked him.

“I can be seeing what I can motherfuckin’ do.” Gamzee closed his eyes and focused his voodoos against the sheer darkness. It was like hitting a wall, a wall he recognized. One he fought against previously. He smirked and pushed outwards, light flooding around them. It wasn’t much brighter, but it was brighter. An oasis from his ancestor’s presence. He couldn’t imagine how that must feel to them.

“Wicked cool.” Pyeran clapped. Gamzee felt a tug at his stomach, he blinked a few times, and realized slowly, something was trying to wake him up. “You should come ’ere more often, everyone would love ya if you’d just do this ev’ry once an’ awhile.”

“I will. I’ll be trying to sleep more. Know it’s no guarantee, but I’ll be trying. Consciousness is
“Don’t worry about it,” Anious said. “We’ve got nothing but time, you’ll be back. None of us can keep ourselves out of here. We’re all Kin. We’re meant to be here as long as we are.”

“Working on that as I’ve always been promising.” Laneen grabbed his arm. “Yeah, beautiful?”

“Stop it.” Laneen said her face flushing golden. “Keep in mind what we said. Work through it, try to keep from letting it happen.”

“I got your message. If I feel myself going, I’ll try to be getting everyone but Karkat away. I’ll then be motherfucking talking to him.”

“Good.” Sennir said, grabbing onto Gamzee’s horn so he could ruffle his hair. “We’ll see you soon, okay?”

~

Gamzee was very surprised to wake up to find Eridan standing over him, Ahab’s Crosshairs in his hands. Eridan looked nervous, but determined.

“What the fuck-?”

“So are you going to apologise to Nep?”

“Listen, Eridan, I’m really not in the mood to do much talking right now.”

“Of course you’re not. You need to apologise to Nep, wwe don’t ewen need to talk about it, just apologise to her.”

“Can you go away? For, like, thirty minutes, then you can assault me with words.”

“No, I’m not goin’ away. Apologise to her.” Eridan gripped his gun more firmly. “Equ’s too busy patchin’ her up to talk to you, so I figured I should. Howw’d you like it if I decided to get rewenge on you by smackin’ Kar around?”

Gamzee eyed the gun. “I know perfectly motherfucking well you can’t use that thing in here. Slightest slip and either it’d bounce off the metal and get you, or it’d go straight through me and cut open the hull, then everyone would die. So, you know, you’re waking me up and pissing me off while you’re effectively unarmed. Do you really think that’s a motherfucking good idea?”

“Not really,” said Eridan, trembling slightly. “But it wwas that or do nothin’. Come on, Gam, Nep wwas your friend, and she’s not inwolwed. I’m pretty sure you’re not fucked in the head enough to really wwant her dead.”

Gamzee stood up, looming over Eridan, and hissed “You ‘wwilling’ to MOTHERFUCKING BET ON THAT?” He cleared his throat and gritted his teeth, trying to retain control. “Why are you even talking to me? We both know what a motherfucking coward you’ve always been. Zahhak scare you more than me now? I can remedy that.”

Eridan pulled back slightly, but didn’t want to lose his ground. He stood up straighter, trying to intimidate the slightly taller troll. He took a breath and put the gun away; it was better not to risk getting trigger happy. He didn’t feel like dying via being sucked into the vacuum of space.

“I don’t think you’re so far gone you wwant us all dead. Just me and Equ, I can accept that, but you
need to tell her you’re sorry and you didn’t mean to.”

Gamzee laughed. It wasn’t a laugh Eridan was used to hearing, and it sent a chill right through his bones. “Oh, oh you little motherfucker, you don’t know any-motherfucking-thing about me anymore.” Gamzee reached forward, stopping short of actually grabbing Eridan. “I don’t even know about myself. I know I want to watch all of you bleed. I want to hurt all of you. But, you see, I’m trying not to.”

Eridan snorted in laughter. “Wwell, you’re failing miserably.”

“You should go, little fish brother, before I do something I’m going to regret… And you’re going to regret too.”

“Bit late for that, unless you really are that far gone!”

Gamzee grabbed Eridan’s left fin and hauled him into an awkward tiptoe position. “Fine. You go tell kittysis I’m sorry. You seem to be poking into my business anyway today, do it some way that’s helpful.”

“It’s hardly going to mean anyfin coming from me,” Eridan said, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

“Well, why don’t you try, say ‘Gamzee said he’s sorry he hurt you. He really didn’t want to, but he’s slowly turning into his ancestor, no matter how hard he is trying to stop it’.”

Eridan’s bloodpusher was throbbon in his chest so hard it hurt. “You have to do it, Gam, not me. That’s the point of an apology.” He tried pulling away, but the claws in his fin just dug in. He didn’t want to tear it, so he stayed put.

“Go on, you little shit, you can go get her for me, then I have green and… motherfuck… just go, Eridan, just fucking leave.”

“Did I strike a chord?” Eridan said, hopeful. Gamzee’s grip had lessened, and Eridan pulled back slightly.

“Did you misunderstand me, motherfucker? You need to leave.” Eridan smirked, feeling a bit more confident, and Gamzee’s snarl intensified. “Get the fuck away from me.”

“Tell me, does it make you proud to know you’re hurting people? Or do you just get off on it?” Eridan hissed before his thoughts had fully caught up. Gamzee’s grip tightened again, yanking Eridan forward. Eridan nearly screamed as he could feel the fin near crunching in the purpleblood’s grip. Gamzee’s eyes narrowed, looking down at him. Eridan was terrified again, and he wasn’t sure if it was a natural fear or Gamzee’s own brand of messed-up psychic powers.

“Remember how I said I’m trying not to turn into my motherfucking ancestor? You gotta listen to me when I say something. I’m doing better, you just gotta stop pushing.”

Eridan glared back, finally meeting Gamzee’s eyes, his own expression full of contempt. “Yeah, you’re doin’ real good, draggin’ innocents in. You wworthless sandcrawwler, you’re exactly fuckin’ like hi-”

“SHUT UP!”

Gamzee’s hands moved before he even knew it, there was a crunch of breaking glass and bone and the sound of tearing skin drowned out by Eridan shrieking, violet sprayed everywhere, the rest of the
group came running to see, Eridan was kneeling and clutching the right side of his face, ignoring the ruined left fin, and screaming “my eye, he took my fuckin’ eye-” and through it all Gamzee was laughing. He looked at the purple on his hands and the broken glass in his knuckles and laughed harder, until he saw Feferi’s face.

He fled, running till he reached the other end of the ship, and shut himself in the storage room, begging his unseen Kin for forgiveness he knew he didn’t deserve.
Chapter 20

“Eridan, stop picking at that.”

Eridan scowled, then winced as the movement of his face pulled at the stitches he’d been rubbing. Kanaya and Equius hadn’t been able to save his eye. The lids were a ragged mess, laced with tiny stitches and sewn closed to protect the empty socket. Equally fine stitches held together what was left of his fin, torn off by his own weight when Gamzee punched him, and closed the deep gash leading across his face. “See, Kar, I would say ‘I told you so’, but...”

“Shut up. Look, I can’t say I’m happy you’re this badly hurt, but I heard what you said to him. What exactly did you think he was going to do? Why the hell would you confront him now anyway? You were avoiding him, everyone was happy.”

Eridan shuffled and mumbled “Okay, I get why he’s hurting me, even if I really want him to stop. But Nep didn’t do a fuckin’ thin’ to him.”

“No, and really, he’s told me he’s sorry about it, and he doesn’t want to hurt us. He says he can’t explain. But seriously Eridan, what did you think he was going to do when you said that?”

“I was kinda hopin’ he’d prove me wrong.”

“Eridan,” Kanaya said softly, “I’m also not saying what Gamzee did was right. But he hasn’t exactly had time to get over everything that happened.”

“You guys make it sound like I think it’s a skinned knee or somethin’. I don’t think it is, I know he’s not ower it, but he needs to stop havin’ such a short temper about it.”

“Eridan,” Karkat said softly, leaning closer. “Trust me when I say I don’t actually think I’ve seen him smile since we’ve got him back. Every smile has been fake or evil. He’s always near killing something or curling up crying. He hasn’t even really started to deal with it, and saying that didn’t help at all.”

“Isn’t that your job?” Kanaya turned to look at Karkat. “To help him get over it?”

“I’m working on it.”

“Obviously not fast enough. Forgive me if this observation is a bit out of place. However, I must make my thoughts known. You’re not much of a moirail if he’s not even the tiniest bit better. On top of that, you don’t seem to pull him away until things are already out of control. In a sense you are allowing his bad behaviour to continue. Perhaps your dysfunctional relationship isn’t helping?”

“You think you could do a better job?” Karkat said, drawing himself up and glaring at Kanaya.

“Well, I think I could certainly do a better job than you are at present.”

“Whoa, both of you stop hittin’ on each other or I swear I’m goin’ to puke.” Karkat and Kanaya both looked at Eridan and shook their heads.

“Thank you for that disgusting image, Eridan,” Kanaya said after a pause. “Are you feeling any better?”

“I just lost my eye, and got my face fucked up by a demented clown. Who at any moment could
come in and finish the job. I’d say I’m doin’ fine.”

“I understand that the question seems a little out of place. I meant if you were in any more pain.” Eridan stared at her and raised an eyebrow, then winced. “I see you think that question was equally stupid.”

“Excuse me, but do you think I could steal Mr. Ampurra fur just a moment? ... It’s nothing bad, Just need to talk to him...”

~

Gamzee blinked in the light as the closet door opened. Equius stood there, looking at him with disgust. Gamzee couldn’t blame him.

“Nepeta wants to talk to you in the control room. You will come now, or I will drag you.”

Gamzee sighed, looking up at Equius. He chewed on his lip and wiped his hand on his pants again, trying to get the final stains of violet off his fingers. He nodded, moving to stand up; he didn’t feel like being too close and alone with Equius, any more than he wanted to have to see Nepeta.

He didn’t mean to drag her into this, he didn’t mean to let his explosive temper drag Eridan down into it this much. His mind flashed back to the shock and horror on Feferi’s face. Somewhere in the back of his mind he could see both of them older, different. Instead of shock, a smile that was so familiar plastered on her face. He wanted to gag; instead he settled for nearly running past Equius.

If the Kin would ever forgive him, he had to start now. He’d apologize to Nepeta and see about saying something to Eridan. He didn’t mean to rip his eye out, it just sort of happened. He didn’t know what was going on in his head anymore. What bothered him the most was the way his guilt was tainted. It was there, but vague and undefined.

The group were standing around the edges of the room, Nepeta and Eridan in the middle. Sollux was doing something with the control panel, but kept glancing up, obviously paying attention. Equius sat beside him, an ominous shadow in the background. Eridan looked confused and as uncomfortable as Gamzee felt.

“You both are acting like I’m going to hurt you. No matter how much you both deserve it, that’s not with this meeting is about,” Nepeta said gently. “I have a proposition for the both of you. It’s a little... out of the ordinary, but that’s okay, desperate times and all that.”

“What?”

“I think that it might benefit all three of us... Well, it might help if we all entered an auspisticeship. Eridan, you and I have never gotten along, something about fish and cats. Gamzee, before... what happened, happened... we got along alright, but you’re angry, and directing it at not only Equius but me. And I’m not even going to go into you two. If someone doesn’t step in--”

Nepeta’s thought was interrupted by both of them laughing. It wasn’t a “this is funny” laugh so much as one of contempt. That made her blood boil and her hands ball into fists at her sides. Neither of them seemed to care or notice. She growled, both of them settling their laughter and looking nervously at her.

“Notice how I didn’t say ‘auspurrstice’. See, I’m taking this very seriously.”

“I don’t need an auspistice, kittysis,” said Gamzee, eyeing Eridan sideways and polishing his claws on his sleeve ominously. “I need five minutes alone with small-fry and something very sharp.”
Nepeta sighed. "Gamzee. Please? If someone doesn’t intervene, one of the three of us is going to end up dead.” She glanced over to Equius, who was fiddling with something inside the control panel but obviously listening in. “And I don’t necessarily mean Eridan or me. Karkat is right. We left to escape death, we shouldn’t let it follow us. We’re supposed to be a team.”

Equius turned around, holding up the spanner meaningfully. “Before you decide, please keep in mind that if either one of you hurts Nepeta again, I will skin you with the claw side of my hammer, blood rank be damned.”

“Ooh, swears. You’re really serious.”

“Don’t make the threat happen sooner, seadweller. My other friendships here are the only reason I haven’t sent you outside to learn your lesson. I wonder if you’d survive the initial decompression or if we’d have frozen fish.”

“Oh, you think you can scare me? Whith a threat like that?”

“Stop,” Nepeta interjected quickly. “I can’t be everyone’s auspistice. And Kanaya is taken, so stop trying to get a million trolls into that quadrant, Eridan. And Equius, I expected better of you.”

“My apologies, Nepeta. I know I should let you handle this on your own, I just don’t want a repeat of yesterday.”

“Don’t worry. There won’t be one.” Nepeta’s eyes glinted. “Will there, boys?”

“I’m smart enough not to start a fight like this. It’d be eleven against one.”

“Are you tryin’ to say I’m an idiot, Gam? Comin’ from you that’s laughable at best.”

“Says the motherfucker I’m standing by.”

“Stop!” Nepeta growled. Both of them looked towards her, and stopped their words. Eridan crossed his arms, with a little “tch”. “Really, Gamzee, what happened was horrible but that’s not a good reason for hurting us, and Eridan, provoking him about it is cruel and really stupid.”

“I’m not provoking him, I’m just tellin’ it like it is! You have to just get ower it, Gam. It happened, so wwhat?”

"I said I wouldn't stick my bulge in you, but I said nothing about knives."

“You wwouldn’t kill me,” Eridan said, pulling himself up, trying to look bigger than the other troll. “You’d hawe hell to pay if you did.”

“There is a lot I can motherfucking do before you becoming all cold and dead. Trust me.”

“That’s the only thin’ I could ewer trust you on. And you knoww I’m gettin’ pretty sick of your wwoe-is-me crap. So wwhat? It’s done and ower. Just stop wwhinin’ and get your head on right. It’s done, get ower it!”

“You don’t know the half of my shit, let alone how I feel about anything. On top of all that, it’s pretty fucked up for you to motherfucking tell me to just ‘get over it’. It doesn’t motherfucking work like that. You’re not only the stupidest fucking chumsucker, but an asshole to boot. I’d be doing all of us a favor if I killed you. Us and the gene pool if you were really motherfucking moronic enough not to know what was coming. He was doping me up to the eyeballs when I thought I’d come off the sopor, at least I had an excuse for not knowing.”
“Guys, I don’t think-”

“I’m not that dumb, clown, of course I knew he was planning to bring out the buckets! I figured you wouldn’t mind! Hell, you got your own fuckin’ famous bloodlink teachin’ you and wantin’ to get closer. Maybe fill your first quadrant and spawn a batch of little Gamzees, horrible as that thought might be.” Gamzee flinched, but Eridan kept shouting. “I really didn’t know he was gonna start cuttin’ you up! Why would my first assumption be that you weren’t happy?”

“Please, that’s enough-” Nepeta tried again.

"Why would you assume I was?!" The darkness was starting to pool around Gamzee again. “Are you really such a MOTHERFUCKING SLUT that you can’t imagine NOT WANTING TO MOTHERFUCKING PAIL WHOEVER ASKS?”

Eridan barked out a mirthless laugh and snapped “Don’t be fuckin’ stupid, a’ course I didn’t want to!”
Chapter 21

There was a clatter as Equius dropped his spanner, the shadows disappeared from around Gamzee, and every eye in the room turned to Eridan. The crew was silent, looking at him, trying to figure out exactly what he had meant. They all knew of his sordid past from when he was conscripted, but if the recent past proved anything it was that assumptions were not something they should rely on.

“What do you mean you didn’t want to?” Kanaya asked slowly, trying to ask delicately, so as not to upset Eridan any more than he already was. “Were you not attracted to them? Or… was it perhaps something else?”

Far from being any more upset than he had been already, Eridan looked confused. “Wwhat do you mean? C’mon, guys, wwhy wwould I wwant to do somefin that hurt that much? I mean, yeah, I’ll do it, I’m not gonna be a wwuss about it, but …”

“Well, yeah, we know it can hurt,” Nepeta said, glancing proudly at a burn scar on her arm and its clawed counterpart on Sollux’s. “But even if you thought that was what was happening, didn’t you think it’s unfair for someone to try a kismesissitude with someone half their siz-”

“Wait, kismesissitude? No, I mean in general. Sorry, Nep, I thought you’d red-pailed before.”

Karkat paled. “Fuck. We’ve got another one.”

“Aw, fuck,” Gamzee murmured, looking ill. “Fuck, who be up and putting an idea like that in your head, fishbro? I mean, okay, I talked a lotta shit, but I wasn’t really gonna do nothin’. I ain’t that big of an asshole, I’m just angry, and I wouldn’t even have motherfucking said it if I’d known…”

“It isn’t like any of them…” Eridan paused, thinking of how to word it. “… carved into me.” He flinched reflexively; no one but Karkat was supposed to know about that, but they’d all seen Gamzee’s scars. When Gamzee didn’t attack he finished his thought. “It was just the regular, you knoww, normal levels of painful.”

“Oh my god.” Tavros put a hand to his mouth. “Who was it? What did they do?”

Eridan blinked, or at least closed his remaining eye, then laughed. “Aww, guys. Come on, wwe’re a bit beyond this wwriggler shit… Oh cod, I’m surrounded by wirgins.”

Vriska laughed, “I don’t think all of us are virgins, Eridan. I mean you and me, me and Terezi… Nepeta and Sollux? Nepeta and Karkat, then Karkat and Terezi? How about you and Feferi, huh? Sure, some of us probably are. But saying all of us are is flat out wrong. You should know from personal experience.” Vriska glanced around the room. “Actually, I think the only virgin here is Toreasnoire.”

“Ah, actually one time when Aradia and Sollux were flipping pale again she came to my place for a Fiduspawn tournament and we, ummm…”

Vriska stared at Tavros’ blush. “Or not. Huh, Pupa Pan’s all grown up. Congrats!” She raised her fist for a bump, but he ignored it. Kanaya and Equius both blushed slightly and said nothing.

“So wwhy are you still keepin’ up wwith this thin’?” Eridan asked, looking confused again. “I mean, you didn’t fake likin’ it wwith me, Wriss…”

Vriska rolled her eye. “Eridan, I hated our first time because you sucked at it. Excuse the pun.”
Eridan scoffed, “It might not have been ‘the best’, wwe wwere both young. Don’t just try to be difficult for the sake of bein’ difficult. You didn’t fake wwith me, the only troll I’we ewer pailed wwith that didn’t. You obwiously knoww the truth behind wwhat they try to forcefeed all of us.”

“Eridan, what are you talking about?” Feferi sounded confused and exasperated.

“Oh come on, are you all just tryin’ to mess wwith me? Ha ha, very funny, mess wwith Eridan. I get it, I’m the laughin’ stock around here, but at least I’m not afraid to be honest about it. Pailin’ is gross an’ creepy an’ really glubbin’ painful, no matter the quadrant you do it in. So you all can stop messin’ wwith me now, because I am honestly unafraid to say it. Trust me, I tried everythin’, tryin’ to find any truth in the lies they taught us. You actually beliewe all that romantic shit? They just wwant to keep up the bucket supply! I can’t beliewe you’re all that gullible! Come on, wwhy wwould you still be lyin’? Wwe left, wwe’re newer goin’ to hawe to send in a bucket!”

Gamzee wasn’t so sure about that final point, but he pushed it out of his mind. He looked at Eridan, whose eye was starting to fill with tears, and his contempt mixed with a rush of platonic pity. Little as he wanted to test it at the moment, at least he hadn’t been broken so thoroughly he believed pailing could never be anything but a trial for anyone. What the hell had happened to Eridan? He stepped forward and raised a hand, letting it hover in the rough vicinity of Eridan’s shoulder, not quite sure if he should touch him.

“I ain’t exactly the authority on not-painful pailing. It really ain’t something if you enjoyed it, that’s all being biology and natural, but you didn’t want it and it kind of hurt? Or did you ever say to any of your partners ‘no’ or like ‘stop’ and they didn’t put their hearclots to your words? Or maybe inside your own thinkpan you wanted it to stop but you didn’t say nothing because you knew it wouldn’t make any kind of mattering at the troll, or for some reason you couldn’t up and be speaking the words?”

Eridan slapped Gamzee’s hand away and glared. “I newer said no, I didn’t wwant to do it. I kneww it wwould be painful. It wwasn’t like that wwas goin’ to be a surprise. I mean, seriously, Gam, just because you didn’t knoww wwhat was goin’ to happen doesn’t mean all of us are that stupid. Some of us actually did more with our wwrigglerhoods then get high, wwatch the ocean, and announce wwhenever their pants wwere put on correctly. You missed the signs, fine, I can say that is pretty stupid. You wwere in his lap for Gl’bgolyb’s sake, wwhat else does that mean? But howw could you not knoww wwould hurt, wwere you so full of soporific toxins that you didn’t even touch yourself? I mean honestly, wwere all had to knoww.”

The room was silent, staring at Eridan. All of them were shocked, mostly confused, and no one really knew what to say to him. Eridan’s speech had gotten louder as time went on, the silence was long enough that it allowed him to continue.

“I’ll admit, I’ll owwn up to my past of sleepin’ wwith wwhoever I wwanted. That ‘wwanted’ is used to mean I asked. I tried to believe wwhat they told us in romantic mowies, and I tried to find any part of it that wwas enjoyable. Of course, I thought maybe it wwas the troll, so I wwent through a feww. Can you fault me for trying to find somethin’ more than terrible in it? Instead it wwas alwways disgustin’ and painful. I honestly wwish I could reject the entire experience, but I can’t. At least I learned that everyone is too afraid to be honest about pailin’. Wwell, fine, I will be. I—”

“Wait,” Kanaya interjected, ruining Eridan’s diatribe combo. “So you asked them, even though you thought - or knew - that you were going to hate it… Pardon my rudeness, but…” She blinked at him, and finally said “Then why would you do it?” She shook her head. “I mean, really. I had the sense to tell you and Equius my flushed quadrant wasn’t open to… well, you know what I mean. I didn’t just go along with it.”
“Oh my god!” Terezi cackled. “How dumb do you have to be to get pailing wrong?”

Vriska joined in her laughter, whooping loudly. “So when you threw up all over me and cried like a grub, that wasn’t just because we were drunk?”

“Okay, yeah, I can see how using your nook would be a problem,” Karkat said, shaking his head in disbelief, “but short of fucking a cholerbear-trap, how the hell did you manage to make using your bulge hurt?”

Equius gaped, too surprised to even require a towel for the moment. “Uh, wow. That’s… either an extremely inappropriate joke or a whole new level of incompetence.”

“Um, yeah, ED, that… that doethn’t really thound normal.”

Sollux’s use of the word “normal” seemed to cut through the last of Eridan’s defenses. He backed towards the door and a sob bubbled up in his throat.

“Okay.” Eridan’s voice was tense. “I get it, I’m the laughin’ stock of this stupid tugship. But I’m being serious, stop fuckin’ wwith me.”

“For once we’re not actually fucking with you.” Karkat shook his head. “Seriously, Eridan. We’re not - teasing, maybe, but we’re not messing with you. It seems more like you are fucking with us. Why would anyone ever pail if it hurt? Do you have no grasp of basic evolutionary principles on top of all the stupidities we knew about? C’mon, if this is a joke, making it in front of Gamzee is fucking disgusting. Seriously.”

Eridan sputtered and shook his head. He opened his mouth, but quickly closed it; he didn’t have words for this circumstance. He didn’t have any idea what he could say. All of them were still angry, still being mean for no good reason. He didn’t want to pail either, but he still did it.

“What is this really about, Eridan?” Vriska asked. “Do you want some type of excuse for why you became the ship’s go-to whore? Or are you just trying to pull some type of joke?” Eridan shook his head, swallowing, trying to hold in his sobs.

“Vriska!” Nepeta interrupted quickly.

“Thith ith a really lame joke, ED, if that’th what it ith. Couldn’t you have tried thomething a little better or more inventive? One that didn’t make uth think you were beating your thex organs with a bag of broken glath.”

“Sollux!” Nepeta turned to him.

“Want to give us details or was something recorded?” Feferi hissed.

“Guys, stop it!” Nepeta shouted. “I think he’s crying. We-”

“I hope the lot of you get chained up and flayed!” Eridan tried to growl between holding in his sobs. “You’re all a bunch of twwisted perwerts, and I hope you get wwhat’s comin’ to you. At least Gam was proactive enough to get wwhat he deserved.” Eridan turned quickly and marched out of the room, keeping his head low and his walk nearly a run.

All of them were left staring at the door, too confused to do more than just stare at where Eridan had vanished off to.

“Was he being serious?” Karkat asked.
“I think he was. Some friends all of you are.” Nepeta was shaking her head. “Couldn’t you all see how much your words were hurting him? Some of what you said is uncalled for unless you’re his kismesis, and the three of you are all broken up with him. You don’t get to say those things any more.”

Sollux and Feferi looked away from Nepeta, obviously ashamed of their actions. Vriska shook her head. “There’s no way he could be serious. Pailing doesn’t hurt… Unless you don’t want it.” Vriska added the last part quickly, glancing over to Gamzee.

“Even then…” Gamzee mumbled.

“You’re not about to freak out on him, right?” Nepeta asked softly, putting her hand on Gamzee’s shoulder briefly before pulling it away. “‘Cause I don’t think he can handle it right now.”

Gamzee shook his head. “No, he was mad, said things he didn’t be meaning. Or maybe he did, but it ain’t like it got the matter. I want to, but I won’t.”

Tavros suddenly stood up from where he was sitting. “Oh, oh.”

“What?” Kanaya turned to look at Tavros.

“Uhh. Gamzee,” he said softly before his voice gained confidence. “I know you’re mad at him, and I don’t want to make you mad at me, but, I think I should go after him.”

“No! No, this is… it’s hard to explain, I should talk to him first.” Tavros wasn’t using his exaggerated “Rufio” mannerisms; he was entirely serious and sure of himself. “I, uhh, I know what he said was horrible, but, well, I’m worried he’s going to hurt himself. Karkat’s right, we need to avoid anyone getting hurt, that’ll just hurt everyone.”

Gamzze reached out and let his fingers brush Tavros’ hand. “Okay. If you think you can help.”

~~~

Eridan was curled up in a corner. His gun was in his lap, his left hand draped over it and resting on the trigger. In his right hand, he held three pills from Terezi’s bottle. He would only need one.

“Uhh, hey, Eridan.” The gun was pointing at Tavros before he could blink. “Okay, I get that you’re upset, but I’m here to help.”

“Howw can you help?” Eridan turned away, wiping his eye on his scarf.

“Okay.” Tavros took a deep breath and sat down next to him. “When you said it hurt, how did you mean?”

“Wwhat, you askin’ me if I got some kinda disease?”

“No! Just asking.”

Eridan sighed. “Stomach ache. Feelin’ sick. Tense. Guess that last one made it worse when I figured lettin’ someone fuck me might work better’n stickin’ it in them.” He sobbed, mucus running down to
his lower lip; he’d been crying hard enough that it was tinted with violet blood. “Guess I shoulda fuckin’ known better. Like I’d be allowwed to be normal.”

“Uhh, I don’t think a normal troll would be on this ship anyway. I mean, look at the rest of us.” Tavros chuckled, but Eridan only cried harder. “But, seriously, it sounds like you were just really unhappy and freaked out. And, um, what you said sounded kind of familiar, and that sort of confirms it. I’ve heard some other people say that.”

“Are you here to mock me more?”

“No, really, Eridan, it sounds familiar, not exact, but I’m not here to, uhh, tease you or anything. It’s kind of a long story, and I don’t think now is the right, uhh, time to tell it. But it’s familiar.”

“So, wwe’re all wweird and my wweird is familiar. Wwonderful. Is that all? I’d like to go back to bein’ alone.”

“It’s not weird… well, I guess it is. But, it’s not a bad weird, it’s just different, and that’s not a bad thing.”

“Yeah, somefin wwhich could get me killed is a perfect thin’.”

“Eridan!” Tavros gripped his shoulders, making him drop the pills, and looked him in the eye. “You are not the only one. I… it’s not exactly the same thing, but what you said is… kinda how I felt. Well, mine is just for the one quadrant, but it’s the same sort of thing. And I looked around, and I found there are actually a lot of trolls who don’t… don’t want to pail. Well, not really a lot, but more than you’d think.”

Eridan blinked. “W-wwhat?” He grabbed Tavros’ shoulders, and hope flooded into his face. “So you must knoww howw to fix it! I just hoped if I kept goin’ it’d wwork, but it didn’t, there’s gotta be somefin else I can do!”

“Um. No, it can’t be fixed. It’s not something you did, or anything. Just some grubs hatch and grow up that way.”

Eridan stared at Tavros, still holding his shoulder. The look of hope and excitement slowly faded until only a hurt, slightly grim expression was left on his features. “Wwhat? No, it has to be fixable.”

“It’s not, but it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay, I’ll be killed.”

“Who is going to kill you? Uhh, other than the fleet who is chasing us because we are deserters and a rebel group. I don’t think anyone here would, uhh, kill you for that. By that logic, they should have already killed all of us for being rebels.”

“Taw, Taw, please there has to be somefin. Anythin’.”

“I’m sorry. I looked for a cure for myself, but, uhh, no, it doesn’t work that way. But it’s okay. There’s this website I used, um, but I’d rather tell everyone the details at once if I’m going to, because they’ll want to know what’s going on, as well. But, well, nobody’s going to hurt you.”

Eridan looked at the floor between his feet, and sobbed again. “I just wwanted to be like eweryone else. I thought if I kept tryin’ it’d start to wwork, and then I thought I’d look even stranger if I suddenly started saying no after I did all that shit. And then I thought wwhat Gam wwas talkin’ about wwas just normal nerves ‘cause I thought it alwways felt that awful.”
“Uhh, ‘everyone else’ is allowed to say no if they want to, you know?” Tavros held Eridan’s hand, and looked a little sterner. “You know what you were doing was really, really dangerous?”

“Wwhy are you helpin’ me? I thought you wwere still mad about wwhat I said to Gam.”

“That doesn’t mean it would have been okay if the same thing happened to you!”

“I don’t think the same thing would have happened….”

“It could have, though, you, uhh, put yourself in a lot of danger, by building that kind of reputation, on top of the normal rivalries that emerge in a troll’s life. I don’t mean it it would be your fault if someone did something, but you could have drawn the wrong kind of attention, and even if you don’t like it normally, I’m pretty sure being outright forced would be much worse. Or what if you caught some horrible illness from someone, or someone used it to get you alone and unarmed? Even with what, uhh, happened, I might be mad at you… But it’s friendship angry, it’s not just blind angry. I don’t want and I wouldn’t, uhh, wish anything like that to happen to you. Despite everything we’re all still friends. After what Vriska, uhh, did, and Aradia, and Terezi. They are all still my friends. So are you, just right now I’m, uhh, a little mad. Friends work through those kinds of things. It takes time though, you know?”

Eridan stared. “That sounded kind of, um… pale.”

“Oh, uhh, does that make you uncomfortable too? I don’t want to make you feel sick or, uhh, anything.”

“No.” Eridan was still staring, surprised at not only the words but that he was having his conversation. “That doesn’t make me feel sick.” He laughed bitterly. “I’m pretty sure my feelin’s about all the quadrants except the bucket parts really are normal. That’s wwhy I thought eweryfin I felt wwas. I thought I could find someone wwho admitted they didn’t like it either and wwe could just not do it outside drone season. I thought I could still have a normal life…”

“Yeah, ‘normal’ isn’t really an option for anyone here anymore, but, um, that doesn’t mean ‘happy’ isn’t. Do you want that website?” Tavros said nervously, trying to disregard how his words sounded; he wouldn’t say much more about the whole situation without further prompting. “Sollux set up a thing where we can use the internet without being tracked. We can’t send outgoing messages till he fiddles with it a bit more, but reading it might help.”

“… Yeah, okay.” Eridan shifted and looked at the floor. “Um, if it’s not gonna make you feel wweird… could you hug me?”

Tavros unhesitatingly wrapped his arms around Eridan, and after a brief struggle to avoid his wings, Eridan returned the hug.

“I think I got snot on your shirt. Sorry.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, it’s just a shirt. So, um, is this a thing now? Like, a pale thing?”

“If…” Eridan started, then paused, before finding the right words.”If you don’t think it wwould complicate anythin’ and you wwant. I knoww I could use a moirail. I don’t knoww about you. But I wwould like it if it was.”

“Wow, well… okay, yeah, so would I. In that case, uhh, you and Gamzee probably really do need an auspistice. I don’t want to have to choose a side.”

“Kay,” Eridan mumbled, nodding. “I’ll go talk to Nep.”
Karkat squinted at the screen. “The ‘Aconcupiscent Invisibility and Education Network’? What the fuck?”

“Uhh, yeah, ‘fuck’ being the operative term and the answer being ‘nothing’. As in, it’s for trolls who don’t like to. Fuck, I mean.” Tavros was slightly orange in the face, and nobody was quite sure if it was because of the topic or because he’d just cursed twice in quick succession.

Gamzee blinked, totally confused. “Huh?”

Tavros pointed and read off the screen, his voice unusually steady. “‘Aconcupiscence, sometimes known as non-concupiscence, may refer to any of the following: 1) a lack of sexual attraction to others, 2) a lack of interest in sex, 3) a lack of romantic interest in one or more quadrants. Despite the common term, lack of interest in the conciliatory quadrants is also possible. This condition is not caused by any illness or trauma, and is not a failing on the part of the troll, but under Empire law is punishable by culling. The mission of the AIEN is to collect information about the condition and spread knowledge of and sympathy for our plight, while simultaneously doing all in our power to protect and support our individual members’.”

Equius frowned. “Some might call this treasonous talk, Nitram.”

“Uhh, we’re already just a little bit beyond worrying about that, don’t you think?” Tavros said, as Eridan quietly facepalmed.

Vriska nodded. “Yeah, I guess I owe you an apology, Eridan. I should have guessed from what you said, Tavros told me enough about it before - actually this is why he and I needed Kanaya to step in. I was quadrant-flipping pretty hard, and he wasn’t flushed and can’t feel black.”

“And you didn’t make fun of him or immediately spread it around?” Karkat sounded shocked.

“Wow, Kanaya has been good for you.”

“Hey, I figured it was just a phase! I was a pretty late bloomer flushed-wise, I thought it was the same thing for him. Guess it wasn’t.”

“It worked out okay for us, though, didn’t it?” Tavros said, smiling at Kanaya, who ruffled his hair.

“Yeah, it’th a bit weird but it’th not like any of uth were keen to pail ED anyway,” Sollux said with a grin.

Eridan scowled. “I blame you for this, you knoww. You sent me all those stupid shock wideos, no wwonder I greww up wwith a wwwarped wieww of pailing.”

“Hey, I watched thothe too and I don’t pukey when AA and I—”

Eridan clasped his hands over his hearducts and started to sing loudly and off-key. “Lalala I am not listening lalala god I hate you…. Aradia gently poked Sollux in the ribs as everyone tried not to laugh.

“So, yeah, that’s what was going on, and, uhh, Eridan really needs help right now, so now, um, we’re, uhh…” Tavros’ blush deepened. “…moirails. Which is why I really think he and Gamzee need Nepeta. I’d like both of them to stay alive.”

Nepeta smiled. “I’m okay with it, how about the both of you? Because, really, we need to get to this place alive.”
Gamzee looked at Eridan and sighed. More than just Tavros’ words echoed around his head. He nodded. “Fine, I can let it happen. I owe both of you a motherfucking lot, least I can be doing is try.”

Nepeta clapped. “How about you, Eridan? I know you kind of talked to me, but are you still okay with it?” Eridan nodded. He felt awkward enough with talking about all of this, he just found out the name for it and learned the basics. He still didn’t know exactly how he felt. He still felt a little bit like a freak, but some part of him was comforted he wasn’t alone and that it wasn’t a sickness.

Nepeta clapped again, and grabbed onto Eridan’s wrist and drug him over to Gamzee. “The furst order of business is to have both of you apologize and say something nice. I can do that no purroblem. Eridan and Gamzee, I’m sorry if I said anything or did anything that hurt you. And both of you are pretty awesome. Eridan can shoot his rifle with one hand, which is awesome. And Gamzee, I don’t know anyone in the world who is as funny as you can be.” Nepeta’s smile was almost contagious.

“Okay, uhh, well… I’m real sorry, kittysis. I shouldn’t have dragged you into this mess and what I said was fucking terrible, though I guess this is something good that’s coming from it.” Gamzee stared at his shoes. “You’re the most forgiving troll I know. Nobody woulda batted an eye if you killed someone who did that to you, but now I’m in your quadrant.” Gamzee shuffled for a moment. “And, uhm, Eridan… Well, it ain’t like this is making me magically not-mad, but… shit, bro, that ain’t no way to live! Sorry, for freaking you out, but you gotta admit, not even a warning was a little cold. But I’ll forgive you for the stuff even though that don’t stop me from being mad, but I’m real sorry about what I did to you too. What I did was worse and I was wrong and at least I can sorta see why you said what you did now but I didn’t have any reasons other than being an asshole. And I won’t do it again and I owe you big and shit I’m rambling… You get me. Is that okay, kittysis?”

Nepeta shrugged. “Close enough. Now, Mr. Ampurra?”

“Sorry I used to creep you out, Nepeta, I guess. It wwasn’t intentional… And um, sorry for not wwarnin’ you, Gam.”

Nepeta pulled her hands away from Eridan’s wrist to clap again. “Look, see, progress, and we can all be furrends, or close to furrends again.”

Both of them nodded, and without Nepeta holding on to him Eridan reflexively backed up a little bit from being that close to both of them. He fidgeted for a moment. “By the wway, thanks, Gam. I know what you meant, at least I’m pretty sure, and thanks for being nice about it.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? It ain’t like you got to choose to be that way.” Gamzee shrugged. “If it’s something that comes natural to you I won’t fault you for being like it. And… I was wrong. You’re not a coward. You stepped in for Nepeta when she was needing someone.”

“Heh. Thanks.” Eridan rubbed his neck and smiled. “You’re not such a bad guy, Gam. Wwell, you wwon’t be if you let yourself be helped.”

“Thank you too.” Gamzee looked at Tavros. “You said it’s only the black quadrant you’re missing, right?”

“Missing’ isn’t the way I’d choose to put it, but, uhh, yeah, that’s the only one I don’t do. Are you asking for the reason I think you’re asking?”

Gamzee looked down, pity filling his heart more than ever. He smiled just a bit and shrugged. He didn’t really feel like bring it up in front of everyone. Karkat and him had a very public
announcement of their moirallegiance, now this, he didn’t feel like making it a trend with his romantic life. Anyway, there was a big risk in him talking about it, and he didn’t feel like taking it when everything was starting to look up. Now wasn’t the time to push his luck.

“We can talk about it more later, bro. Right now, I think there are some other things we have got to do.”

Nepeta clenched her fists and crossed her arms in front of her. Gamzee and Eridan looked at each other, then assumed the position themselves, and they executed a perfect three-way fist-bump.

“Purrfect!” Nepeta squealed. “I am so purroud of you both!”

“Aww,” Eridan mumbled, smiling and shrugging.

Nepeta scurried off into the corner and picked up her computer.

“Hey, what’s up there, kittysis?… Are you updating that stupid shipping wall?”

Eridan slapped his forehead again. “Oh cod, the fuckin’ shipping wall - we’re gonna end up auspisticisin’ for Nep and everyone else when she rambles on about this…”

“See?” Nepeta said, delighted. “Already you’re agreeing on something!”

Gamzee looked sideways at Eridan. “Uh. Sorry about everything. Really I am.”

“It’s okay, I’m sorry about wwhat I said, too. An’ it could have been wworse,” Eridan said, tugging gently at his eyepatch. “I still have enough eyes to see, and I guess this got me an in wwith Taw, he says I look pretty pitiful noww.” He chuckled. “Okay, you hurt me pretty bad, but you also led to me learnin’ there’s a name for wwhat was goin’ on wwith me and gettin’ two quadrants filled in a day, and they’re the ones I don’t ever have to pail in. I think I win.”
“Karbro, you really don’t need to be watching me while I’m cooking. There ain’t really room for two in here.”

“Yes I do. I can’t leave you alone with sharp things, I want to make sure your thinkpan’s not so addled you wind up slicing your fingers off.”

Gamzee translated this from Karkat-speak, and sighed. “I ain’t gonna be killing myself now, bro. If I was planning that I’d have done it before we up and left.”

“It’s just...”

“It’s just what? You think that I’m going to snap and hurt myself or others? Ain’t that why you’re here?”

“Well yes, to put it bluntly. That’s also, why I’m right here. So it doesn’t happen.” Karkat paused, and continued. “So do you think you’re going to be okay now you and the guys have an official agreement?”

Gamzee chewed his lip. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so... uh, don’t take this as saying you ain’t a good moirail, please, but there’s only one of you and a little backup is a big help. And yeah, I think they’ll be able to help us both. I’ll do my motherfucking best.”

“Good.” Karkat shook his head. “I think Eridan needs you and Nepeta as much as you need this. If we left him alone he’d do worse to himself than you ever could have.”

“... Am I coming in at a bad time?” Feferi said, peering around the door. “I wanted to talk to Gamzee, but I don’t know if he wants to talk to me.”

“He’s just cooking, it’s already kind of cramped in here, but I’ll see what we can do. Gamzee, put the knife down, and talk.”

“I can keep cooking and talk, just ‘cause a knife’s in my mitt don’t mean I’m going to use it on things other than food,” Gamzee mumbled towards his hands not willing or wanting to look up.

Karkat shifted so Feferi could slide into the room. With the three of them in the room, there was hardly space to move around. Karkat heard Gamzee’s breathing hitch, and all of the things he had been theorizing seemed to be coming together.

“What do you need, fishsis?” Gamzee could even tell how strained his voice was, he was sure they could too. He tried to blank out like he used to, but his fears were out of control, and he couldn’t seem to keep hold of them.

“Well,” Feferi sighed. “It’s just... Eridan is high-maintenance and a bit difficult to deal with. I don’t just say this as his ex-kismesis either. I’ve been with him in all four quadrants at different times, and I know what it’s like. I also know Tavros is a bit... sensitive. Now I might be worrying over nothing, and Tavros can probably look after himself, but if things do go wrong...” Feferi took a deep breath. “I know you care about Tavros, but even if he does get hurt, please don’t try to hurt Eridan in turn. I know Nepeta’s the one who should be mediating between you two, but I’ve known Eridan longer than she has, so I thought I should warn you.”

“I understand.” Gamzee was fidgeting, and Karkat noticed how strained his voice sounded.
“Anything else?”

“Oh... umm, well, Gamzee... I wanted to say sorry about what happened. I know it doesn’t help, but I’ve wanted to say it since I found out. You’ve been running away, or finding a way to leave every time I’ve talked to you or tried.” Feferi looked down briefly before straightening up and looking back at him. “Is there a reason for that?”

Gamzee turned to face her, Karkat watched every part of Gamzee tense as he looked at her. “No, don’t worry yourself over it. Just I don’t like being around trolls much anymore.” He swallowed, nervous and mostly terrified. If she grew about two feet they’d be identical. After her pupation he didn’t know what he was going to do. “See, I’m not running away now.”

“Don’t lie to me, Gamzee.” His stomach tensed at her tone of voice. He took another breath and tried to let this conversation continue without being obvious. “I’ve tried to talk to you when no one else was around, you still run off.”

“Sorry about that, I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again...” He had to shake his own tone of voice away. “Promise.”

She tried to give him an encouraging smile, and he looked away, thinking of seadweller teeth in the Highblood’s mouth. Looking away didn’t help, as he saw his own face in the polished metal of the cabinet. Little similarities seemed to spring out at him. Her smile was getting to him, and she wasn’t as fine-built as she had been. Instead she looked stockier, less like royalty and more like a soldier. Though it was obvious by her hands she was actually the heiress.

“Gamzee.” He could almost hear her voice when she spoke. He clutched the knife tighter in his hand. “What’s wrong? You look sick. Do you need any help?”

“I’m fine,” he said, too quickly to be the truth. He cleared his throat, trying to figure out how to get her to leave. He could feel his bloodbeat getting stupid again, and he really didn’t want to have one of those attacks when he was holding a knife, or when he was in a cramped space, or in front of her. Karkat would be okay, he had handled them before.

“Anything else, fishsis? I got that I shouldn’t be mad at Eridan if he breaks his diamond with Tav, and I should stop running away from you... Got any other words for me or can I be finishing up food for all of us?” He tried looking over at her, not managing to look at her; he looked just over her shoulder, but it was close enough. She should be happy he could manage that much when she was still smiling. He could take in her silhouette this way, and had to focus harder on the wall further away, noticing even more. He had wished, prayed, and hoped that they had been lying about that.

It could just be he was seeing things because they had made that insinuation. He tried to calm himself down and pretend that all of the things he was seeing were mere coincidence, and he’d get over it sooner rather than later. She was right, he couldn’t keep running away from her. It was getting suspicious, and the last thing he needed was for her to ask him why until he gave an honest answer. The whole ship knew who and what had happened. He’d like to keep his, and maybe her, sick beginnings to himself, and not have to talk to any of them on the subject.

“No, that’s it...” Feferi said slowly. She couldn’t help but feel like he was trying to worm his way out of the conversation. But it could have just been because he wanted to finish cooking. “I’ll see you at dinner then.”

“See you then.”

Feferi nodded, and lingered a moment longer, before she took her leave.
Karkat waited long enough he was pretty sure Feferi was out of earshot, then moved closer to Gamzee, but not too close. “She looks that much like the Empress?” he muttered, low enough that he was pretty sure only the two of them heard.

Gamzee nodded, and busied himself in the cabinet, staring into it so he didn’t catch sight of his own reflection. He supposed he should be thankful for the scars; they made him look less like them.

~~~

Feferi sighed and slumped next to Sollux. “Well, I told him. I hope everything does work out well.”

“Yeah. Okay. I hate ED’th gutth and what he did wath moronic, but thtill, ouch. He needth AT... I thould thart calling him TTh or thomething. But AT, right now, I think.” Sollux started to comb through Feferi’s hair with his fingers, and it twined itself lovingly around his wrists. “And GZ’th been fucking weird - he wath athking about uth a few dayth ago, like were we thtill pale and how wath it going, and he wath really creepy about it. I’d have thought he’d picked up thhipping from AC, but thith wath before their thing. Tho I’m wondering if he’th gonna do the thame now. Hope not.”

“That does sound weird. Maybe he’s just insecure. You did have a pale thing with Karkat a while back, maybe Gamzee’s scared you still have feelings for him?”

Sollux laughed. “Yeah, the firtht ever moirallegianthe where the pair make each other more pithed off, and I broke up hith matethpritthhip. That wath a bad idea all round. Don’t get me wrong, KK’th cool, but...” He snuggled up to her and purred. “GZ’th got nothing to worry about there.”

“I don’t think you can fault him for being worried. He does reelly need a moirail right now. He’s probably just making sure that it won’t turn out badly, or that no one is going to interfere. You had a thing once, no doubt he’d making sure it’s really over.”

Sollux nodded and they sat in silence for a while, claws running lightly through each other’s hair, until Sollux suddenly said “What’th the etiquette for being pithed off at people on behalf of your friend’th moirail? I mean, EQ wath kind of a jerk to GZ, but I’m actually thtarting to like the guy. When he dropth the hemothpectrum crap he’th kind of fun, and KK and GZ juth won’t thee that maybe he wathn’t actually trying to be hurtful. It wath awkward enough that he’th my thpademate’th moirail...”

“I’m really having a hard time imagining Equius and the concept of ‘fun’ together.” Feferi sighed. “I don’t know, I’ve been a bit conflicted myself. For shallower reasons, though.”

“Then him working with hith jumpthuit undone?” Sollux grinned.

Feferi tried and failed to contain the flush on her cheeks. She dropped her head to hide it at the very least. She knew she shouldn’t bring it up. But things were starting to repair. Sollux was a neutral party and her moirail, honestly she should have been able to talk to him about it.

“I take that as a yeth.” Sollux laughed a little. “Tho, you’re finally fluth cruthing again. On EQ ,no doubt.”

“I wouldn’t call it a flushcrush. Appreciation, yes, but he’s so annoying! Not in a caliginous way, either.”

“I think he’th getting better. Thlowly, but at leathht he’th uthing my name now. Okay, yeah, I’d never have talked to him if I didn’t have to, but I did, and he’th not-okay, he uth, but he’th potentially not ath bad ath we thought. And we do know he maketh a great moirail... am I allowed to thay that...
“I don’t see why you can’t. I can appreciate his skills, that doesn’t mean I want to date him, or do anything with him. He is still carping on about the hemospectrum. It’s just…”

“You’re looking for a reason now. Be honest with me and with yourself. If you have a crutch on him tho what? You’re not being a bitch or a bad person because of it. What he did, or I guess what he didn’t do, it’s starting to become old newth. GZ is slowly coming around. EQ is trying to make up for it. I don’t think he meant for it to happen. I don’t think ED meant for it to happen either. They messed up, I know if I would have been the one he was talking to I would have messed up. And long ago they regret it, you’re allowed to have feelingth. This is thuppishly the best thweepth we get. Early contraception until we hit fifteen. Don’t let all this bog you down.”

Feferi sighed, and lightly scratched at Sollux’s scalp with her claws. “Do you think he would be good for me?”

“That’s the spirit. He’d offset a lot of your qualitieth. He’s quiet, you’re loud.”

“Hey!”

“You are, that’s not a bad thing. It’s just you are. But yeah, I think he’d be good for you. At least it’s not some asshole. Hopefully, you’d listen to me if it wath.”

“Of course!” Feferi beamed. “I do wish he’d drop the hemospectrum thing once and for all, but he’s not a bad troll, just a bit set in his ways… Would you be terribly hurt if I talked to Nepeta about him?”

“No, no, that’s okay. Actually, I think you’d get on okay with her, the fifth-cat thing aside. Then if you become friendth thhe and I can thtrive over her taking away your time with me,” Sollux chuckled. “Tho, you, me, and AC in a three-pronged attack; Operation Make EQ Leth Of A Dick ith go.”

~~~

“Equius?”

The blueblood nearly dropped his spanner again. “Y-Your Highness! Ahem. Yes. Hello.” He made a motion which both passed off as a salute and allowed him to wipe his brow. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Well, I wanted to thank you, and apologise. I know all of us have been worried, and nervous, but you’ve been really nice through all of this. I wanted to apologise for the stress, but thank you for working so hard on the ship to keep it going.”

“I’m happy to help maintain this ship, I also wish to arrive wherever we land in one piece.”

“It’s a pretty good jug of bolts, I mean, it’s falling apart, but it’s our falling-apart-jug-of-bolts.” Feferi smiled, nervously patting the wall. “I mean it, thank you for making this ship a bit more habitable while we are on it.”

“No apology is needed, Your Highness. I am only doing my part as I would expect anyone else among all of us to do. Though I am very grateful you’ve chosen to acknowledge my contribution.”

“There is no need to be so formal, I’m not “Your Highness” or “The Empress” yet. All I am is the Heiress. It’s alright, Equius, I’m fine if you want to speak to me as an equal… We are friends after
all.” Feferi could watch a blush spread across Equius’ cheek before he grabbed a towel, wrapping it around his neck.

“I don’t know if that would be... correct. Despite my distaste for Eridan and most other seadwellers, you are the Heiress, the soon to be Empress. I feel as if it would trespassing upon something.”

“It wouldn’t be - I’m asking, aren’t I? You don’t have to refer to me by my tidal. Just as Feferi, your friend.”

“I can’t look pasture station... I mean--” Equius’ blush deepened, Feferi let out a little giggle.

“I like the musclebeast puns. Don’t eel you have to tide oar apologise about those either.. Oh wait! I have one! We’ll have to appearch all of this with equinimity!” Feferi smiled, looking up to the blueblooded troll who was rubbing the back of his neck with the towel around his shoulders, fluffing his hair the tiniest amount. The smile faded to her having to chew on her lip.

“That was a fine and strong pun, Heiress.” Equius cleared his throat slightly. “I was being honest, I feel as if it would be right for me to refer to you correctly.”

“Equius, is it too difficult to call my by my name?”

“Well. It’s just...” Equius' trembling hand swept the screwdriver off the panel, and both of them went to grab it. Equius yelled a warning, too late, and then froze as he realised Feferi's hand was resting unharmed in his, wrapped around the screwdriver.

"Y-... I'm not crushing your bones," he said stupidly, trying desperately not to clench his hand.

Feferi chuckled. "I swim with Gl'bgolyb in the deepest ocean under millions of tons of water. A handshake isn't a problem." His hand was sweaty, and hers slipped out easily; she’d expected the smell to be unpleasant, but it wasn’t really that prominent, not as sour as most land-dwellers tended to be. Just a little salty, which she found she liked. It almost smelled like home.

"Wh-while you're here," Equius stammered, face bright blue, "I'd like to apologise for my previous disruptive behaviour during this voyage. That was dangerous to all on board, and I should have known better, I've been working so hard on controlling my temper. I promise it won't happen again. I should be fine, I have plenty of mechanical problems to distract me..."

"Thank you." Feferi smiled. "I think you're doing a great job."

Equius stuttered something and decaptchalogued another towel.
They had been on this ship for about a week now, and Icatus Gritch had decided he missed his own ship. The subjugglators gave them a wide enough berth, choosing not to interact with the bluebloods or violetbloods more than they had to. All except the few subjugglator trainees who had also been promoted, along with their mentors, who seemed displeased at the fact they had to share close quarters with not only a seadweller but also a blueblood.

Gritch couldn’t exactly complain about their lodgings, they were guests of the Highblood and given the best treatment that SAIGE-40 had to offer. They did manage to always have a few hours to themselves every day as the purplebloods either did their church work or were busy worshipping their terrifying gods. The time alone was nice, but even spending a short time in such close quarters with any of the purplebloods left a lot to be desired.

“Pardon me, Mentor Gritch.” The young purpleblood - he couldn’t remember his name - walked past him, the pardon just so he’d move out of the way. He had to give one thing to the subjugs, their trainees were some of the most respectful he had ever witnessed. He’d ask them their secret if he didn’t suspect it had something to do with the fact that the Tents were always looking for sacrifices. Young subjugs tended to be a favorite.

Preosh and Gartel had claimed a spot in the strife practice area, and Gritch decided to go and keep an eye on them. He found them at the centre of a loose gathering of purpleblood students, along with a couple of blues and violets, including the blueblood teacher Harkol. The two violetblood girls were perfectly matched, their fighting styles showing clear signs of having learned together; they’d been kismeses since puberty, and naturally had been each other’s most common strife partners. Kismeses practicing together could be dangerous, but of course that was the point; nothing prepared a student for battle like an opponent they knew wouldn’t hold back. The girls moved with the grace common to seadwellers, Preosh’s flail chains and the razor wire Gartel had rigged up her bladed yo-yo with flashing in the air around them. Cheers and woofbeast-whistles arose from the crowd as the yo-yo cracked against Preosh’s horn and sent her staggering, only to return the attack with even more enthusiasm.

Gritch sighed nostalgically. Ah, young hate.

They weren’t being any more dangerous than they had been before. To most it wouldn’t seem reserved, but Gritch could tell both of them were training hard but taking fewer risks than normal. Still not being sure of their whole mission, let alone of the medteams on the ship, probably increased the worry. Gritch didn’t want any of his students to show up injured in front of the Highblood, more than the occasional bruise.

He didn’t particularly want any of his students to spend more time around the Highblood than they had to. Icatus Gritch prided himself on being a forward-thinking troll, he had been too young or not born when the majority of the landdweller-seadweller rivalry occurred. He had secondhand prejudice that he grew out of, unlike some of the few older seadwellers. He held no platonic loathing for any landdweller, unless they were lazy or intentionally stupid. He hated seadwellers for the same reasons, so he guessed that made it even.

The Highblood just struck him as odd, or slightly off. The more he thought about his life, the more he realized that, though many low-generations had passed, he could not remember a government without the purpleblooded troll. That did little to settle his emotions. It wasn’t unheard of for a troll to live a long time, his own blood was testament to that, but subjugglators tended to get themselves killed much sooner. He examined his mental picture of the Highblood’s face, trying to guess his age.
more accurately, until he was forced to give up out of combined inability and nerves. That smile belonged on a shark more than a troll.

He watched as the flail wrapped around the metal-enforced string of the yo-yo and knocked it from making skinfall. Gartel sneered, reeling it back for another attack, making a small error and leaving her other arm open to a quick strike with the chains of the flail. It was a fluid dance and if not for the worry that it might end badly it would be a joy to watch.

Shuran Harkol had moved closer to him while he was watching. He gave Gritch a sleazy wink and nodded to the girls. “One of the perks of the job, eh?”

“I’d, uh, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk that way about my students?” Gritch said, trying to sound stiff and disapproving but slipping into his usual unsure tone. He hated that about himself, but he had little to be confident about; he’d never fit in with the popular crowd when he was a wriggler, he’d been stuck in a low rank for all the centuries of his long life, and he had his suspicions the students didn’t appreciate his efforts to relate to them as much as he hoped. Not that he didn’t love his job, oh no, it was a vital and well-respected position even if not as glorious as some, and he was sure he was fussing over nothing with regards to the students’ thoughts on him. He’d had the highest percentage of surviving students per sweep of all the violetblood teachers for the past century, so clearly he was doing something right, and why wouldn’t the students like him? He made an effort to be pleasant and approachable while not being soft on them. He avoided killing them unless it was necessary, and took every step to make sure it wasn’t, though he never held back when it was. Tough but fair, that was him.

Thinking of killing his students made him think of Eridan. Pity about that boy, he’d have gone far if he’d only applied himself more. According to the girls, he’d been too “busy” with extracurricular activities. Silly boy. It was unsettling to think that the kid deserved to meet any fate that had been promised since they had been promoted. Defecting was terrible, but they were young, the promise of power or the promise of adventure would be enough to sway the most loyal of trolls. There was no guarantee once a troll was conscripted they’d become anything more than low-ranking. As Gritch knew well, the longer a troll lived at low rank, the more other trolls wanted nothing to do with you.

“What? I was just saying, it’s nice to watch the younglings practice. See the way they behave.” It was a poor cover on Harkol’s part, and Gritch wasn’t too sure he wanted to get into it with the other mentor. That wouldn’t set any type of positive example for his students. Preosh and Gartel reset to begin another fight. A few of the other students were mumbling around them. Gritch was sure that they had caught the eye of a few of the trolls watching them. Both were smart, capable, and free trolls. That was one horrible downfall of having so many young recruits in an area together. He wondered if that had been Eridan’s problem. But if what Preosh said was true, that people were happy to… take advantage of him, but didn’t like him, that had to have hurt. Gritch frowned again; he wouldn’t outrightly disobey his superiors, but he wasn’t sure if Eridan deserved to be killed for what he did. He couldn’t make claims to any of the other rebels, but he seriously doubted Eridan had meant to hurt the Empire by it. Gritch vaguely remembered the original Sufferists; he’d been barely more than a grub at the time, held up in Squidpop’s tentacles to watch the execution from the sky above the crowd. He did know their strength lay in words, wicked lies wheedling into the hearts of Empire-fearing trolls. Poor naive Eridan, he was evidently easy to talk into things, he’d probably been an easy target.

The purpleblood he’d passed in the hallway was watching intently. Gritch didn’t like the way the purpleblooded watchers were eyeing the bleeding nicks and cuts on the combatants’ skin. He rather liked his own blood where it was, and he had the uncomfortable thought that mixing his with that of the bluebloods would make the subjugglators’ own holy shade. He wished he still had a living moirail, he could have done with some backup. He tried not to look scared as the boy turned to talk
“Mentor Gritch,” he said softly, moving into some type of open-armed bow. It was short enough the action didn’t quite compute with the violetblooded troll. “Ganmed Lomust.” The introduction was brief, a reminder of a name he was sure he heard before. “Are you doing well?”

Either the purpleblood could sense his fear or his disapproval, which neither would have surprised him they usually had some type of psychic power. The boy didn’t seem like he meant any harm by his question; still, Gritch always had to wonder about subjugglators’ intentions.

“I’m quite alright, more concerned for when they are going to get tired?” The lie was pretty simple, he had too much on his mind to fully orate, let alone at a subjugglator who would probably see about getting him killed for some of his thoughts.

Lomust looked appreciatively as Preosh sent Gartel reeling with a kick to the gut. “Don’t suppose one of them might be open to another match when they’re done? I always like to test myself against different styles. Or maybe you could offer some advice?”

“If you’re willing, I’m sure I can find something new to teach you, eh? You’re very friendly for your, uh…” Gritch paused, unable to find a way to finish his sentence.

“He means he’s surprised you’re not gutting him,” Harkol added helpfully.

“That’s silly. My weapon is a crushing one.”

“I’m sure that brings him quite a bit of peace.” Harkol said. “What do you need?” Gritch didn’t miss the quick face Lomust made, no doubt displeased with Harkol’s barging into their conversation. Lomust cleared his throat, looking over towards Harkol.

“Would you mind leaving?”

“You got me curious what a wriggler subjug wants to learn from a seadweller.” Harkol didn’t have a smile but his tone suggested a sarcastic one.

“What? I like to learn new stuff. I can’t learn enough just by fighting other neophytes, I need to know new tricks from somewhere. There’s a billion trolls in the empire and each one’s got something different to teach, why should I restrict myself?”

“Very poetic?” Gritch said, raising an eyebrow and scowling as Harkol snickered.

“Besides, I can’t only fight other purples. We need different colours for-”

“Yes, I think we get the picture!”

“Aw, sir, I wouldn’t kill you in a practice fight!”

Preosh staggered up, bloodied but triumphant, Gartel nursing a black eye and bloodied nose in the ring. A couple of other recruits were already helping her tidy herself up, and she was milking it for all it was worth; even Gritch, who normally had no eye for such things, could smell pity-flings brewing. Preosh threw a salute. “Sorry, did I interrupt something, sir?”

“Not exactly, I was just speaking with… Lomust? About the idea of a practice strife with you or Gartel, or something along those lines.” The purpleblood nodded, looking over at Preosh, and still eyeing her wounds. “A conversation you can be a part of. I bet you are, but are you all right?”
Preosh nodded, a smile on her face. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“You put on quite a show back there.” Harkol was somewhere between that greasy smile and a legitimate one. “Very impressive.”

“Thanks, sir,” she said, as shortly as she dared, and glanced sideways at Ganmed. “You said you were up for a match?”

“Oh, yes!” Ganmed was practically glowing with joy. “I’ve never faced flailkind before, that’s unusual.”

“Oh, it’s not too unusual for me, but I guess it’s not that common of a weapon. What am I going against?”

“Staffkind,” Lomust said, unnecessarily, as he produced the weapon in question from his specibus. A good weapon, as befitted a purpleblood; solid well-polished wood, topped with a barkbeast skull.

“Oh, I hate those,” Preosh muttered. Gritch knew what she meant; if the chains got tangled on her opponent’s weapon she could be disarmed, and it was easy to accidentally get them wrapped around a staff. She was good enough with the flail that such an outcome was less likely than it might have been, though. He found himself quite keen to see this match. Now he looked, the boy wasn’t eyeing Preosh like a fresh steak, or more accurately a new paint-pot, as so many of the others were; he seemed actually interested in talking to her. Gritch hoped he was reading the signs right, but then Preosh could handle herself even if he wasn’t. If he was, well, Preosh had lost her wrigglerhood moirail to the culling drones and her matesprit was now a runaway, maybe something good could come of this…

Ganmed and Preosh made their way towards the ring she had just vacated. There was a whisper among a few of the other subjugglator students. This would be one of the first strifes between divisions, aside from the mentor fights that were purely to show the younglings how to battle effectively. Ganmed’s mentor was eyeing the ring as much as Gritch (and, as he saw with a little glance sideways, Harkol) was. No doubt all of them thought this fight would be impressive.

“One rule,” Preosh said loud enough the room could hear, as was tradition. “No psychics, I’ve never faced a subjugglator initiate before.”

“I would have guessed it would have been no gill shots,” Ganmed said with a smile. “No problem, you can face all of me later if the strife goes well.”

They circled in silence, Preosh’s flail-chains clinking together and Ganmed’s staff at the ready, until he suddenly swept it forward. Preosh ducked under it and her weapon’s chains whacked against his side, causing him to let out a shrill honk of surprise, let go of the staff with one hand, and swing the fist down on the back of her neck.

Harkol tutted. “Clumsy, clumsy.”

“Watch them closely, Filona learns fast,” Gritch said, for once sounding sure of himself. His students were his pride; if he could rely on nothing else, he had his faith in them.

“I’m impressed you think so highly of a few wrigglers.” Harkol’s disbelief was nearly tangible in his voice. “Then again I guess you do know them quite well. I wouldn’t let any of mine face a subjug without a promise of them making it out alive.”

“I don’t think he’s going to kill her. Not without his mentor’s approval. Which wouldn’t be granted seeing as the… Highblood is fond of her?”
Preosh slid back, not entirely out of the staff’s range, but enough she could assess Ganmed’s form. She hadn’t forgotten the rules he taught her, and Gritch had to stop himself from smiling. Her first time fighting an opponent meant she had to do some quick study. Ganmed, true to subjugglator form, kept himself still, giving very little about his tactics away. No doubt when he had a chance he’d let himself go and then Preosh could have a better study of his style.

“I nearly forgot about that.” Harkol said, his eyes not off the battle. “I don’t suppose you know why the Highblood is fond of a seadweller.”

“Honestly, I don’t really know,” Gritch said. “She did speak up in front of him, maybe he likes her bravery? Or maybe he just likes seadweller girls, Her Imperious Condescension is his moirail, after all?” It sounded a little lame to him, but he couldn’t think why else. He hoped it was that innocent. For all he knew, the Highblood thought Preosh had a particularly nice shade of blood. Harkol looked less than impressed by his answer, but it was all Gritch could give. Asking any troll why the Highblood liked something was pretty stupid. Then again no troll would presume to ask the Highblood why he liked something, lest the troll asking became something he disliked.

Preosh made the first move this time; had Ganmed fought with her before he would have known it was a feint towards his legs. When he moved to defend it the handle of her flail knocked against his cheek. Ganmed slammed his staff against her side. Hard enough Gritch could watch her take a sharp inhale, and have to remember how to breathe while she tried to dodge the next attack.

“Not too bad,” Ganmed said with a smile. “Don’t forget to keep blocking if you can’t stand a little wound.”

“I’ve given myself worse injuries brushing my teeth!” Preosh said, smirking even as she continued gasping for breath. Gartel had stopped her dramatics and was watching, licking her lips. Preosh swung the flail again, aiming for Ganmed’s horns, and he nearly fell backwards in the attempt to duck. “Hey, this is fun! Maybe I should strife with you more often.”

Ganmed smiled slightly, letting himself move back away from the close range and easy attacks. “You’re pretty fun to be honest. I’m surprised in a good way, I didn’t think seadwellers had a lot of fight in them.” Ganmed spun the staff in his hand before locking it in his grip. “Saw too many wash up on shore when I was a wriggler.” Ganmed’s moves were flashy, and a great distraction for the hit he was aiming towards her knees.

Preosh saw the blow coming and jumped, not fast enough; the staff caught her and knocked her down to one knee. Ganmed realised his mistake as she punched him in the groin, bringing him down as well, and they ended up tussling on the floor. There was a rip, and Preosh’s shirt gave way beneath Ganmed’s claws.

Harkol joined in the whooping and whistling. “Go for the belt next!”

Suddenly, he found his collar in the surprisingly strong grip of Icatus Gritch, the seadweller staring him coldly in the eye.


Harkol’s eyes went wide, everyone in the room was looking at them. Gritch didn’t particularly care. This troll was disgusting, preying on barely-adult trolls. Gritch had had about enough of his comments towards Harkol’s own students. The last thing Gritch wanted was from his students to have to deal with the same mistreatment. These were delicate times for the younglings. They didn’t need some paltry adult taking advantage of them.
“You’re a little uptight don’t you think? It was just a comment.” Harkol tried to laugh it off. That only made Gritch’s grip tighten on the other troll’s collar. “It was a joke.”

“I’m sure it was,” Gritch hissed, his eyes narrowing.

Even the two combatants had paused and sat up to watch. Ganmed was still beaming like a wriggler at a party, despite the cuts he now bore on his face. “Wow, your teacher’s cool.”

“Sir? With all due respect, I can take care of myself. I’m not a wriggler anymore,” Preosh said, looking at Gritch with slight concern and then glaring viciously at Harkol. “I’m sure we won’t have any more problems, will we?”

Harkol looked over to Preosh, the grip on his collar lessening. There was no doubt he was hiding his real expression, but he let out a little smile. “Yeah, we won’t have any more problems.” Gritch released the blueblood and looked over to Preosh.

“It wasn’t a matter of taking care of yourself, I can’t stand those type of comments. You were busy, a team always looks out for each other.” Any time was a good time to impart knowledge to his students.

“Thanks,” she said, unable to hide a slight scowl.

“Hey, be nice, kid, your mentor was doing you a favour,” said Harkol, much to the surprise of the onlookers. He looked sideways at Gritch. “Could do with taking the stick out of his chute, but I think I like him. You got more grit than I thought, seadweller.” He thumped Gritch’s back, knocking his glasses off.

Gritch gritted his teeth, picking his glasses up and trying to not to show Harkol the extent of his displeasure. Interdepartmental fights had to end somewhere and if he had to be the poster child for ginning and bearing it he would be. Although some part of him just wanted Harkol to make a disgusting comment toward a subjugglator. Neither his apology nor his words to Preosh had been genuine, and Gritch disliked one thing above all others, and that was liars.

“Yo, Preosh right?” Ganmed called. Preosh turned back towards the subjugglator. “Since our match was interrupted maybe we can do it again sometime? We’re about out of free time right now, but later?” Gritch did his best to ignore Harkol beside him, looking like he had another terrible comment on his mind. Instead, he watched what he was pretty sure was a subjugglator trainee being bashful. Officially, Gritch had now seen it all.

He still had room for some surprise at a sound which made his hackles rise. Never before had he heard applause sound so ominous. The subjugglators in the crowd looked at something behind him and bowed low, everyone else hurriedly following. Gritch and Harkol spun and dropped into bows themselves. The Grand Highblood himself had entered the room while they were busy. Luckily, he didn’t seem upset at not having been instantly noticed.

“Oh please, relax, let’s pretend at this moment we’re on equal footing. Despite obvious discrepancies. I must say, the… group of you are getting along quite well. Better than I anticipated. I expected more blood. But you’ve proven me wrong, in the best possible way.” The Highblood didn’t look bored or angry by that fact. Gritch hated this part of the promotion, being around the Highblood was hours of his life he wondered if they’d all get away without being torn to shreds.

“Thank you, sir?” he said, immediately wishing he hadn’t as the words rang out in the silence and the great skull-painted face looked directly at him. Harkol was hiding a smile next to him. The insufferable prick. Not even an attractive insufferable prick, though that was probably for the best;
“You seadwellers are a mouthy bunch.” There was enough of a pause that Gritch had it in him to be nervous. “Don’t worry, I like that.” Gritch let out the breath he was holding and gave a sharp nod, not knowing how to return the conversation, or avoid it. “I have some wonderful new information for all of you - come, let us find somewhere to go over it.”

Gritch knew there was actually more danger in numbers, surrounded as he was by the followers of the terrifying troll in front of him, but he still felt nervous about leaving the crowd. The smaller group of those assigned to the special mission followed, each trying to be the one at the back, with the exception of Harkol, who puffed himself up and followed the Highblood as closely as he could while remaining safely respectful.

The moved to what had been working as their makeshift meeting hall and schoolfeeding room. It did fit all of them, not uncomfortably, but not comfortably either. Somewhere between, and to Gritch that just made these little events less to look forward to. Once the troll who had managed to be in the back managed to find a seat, all of them were handed out a folder. Gritch had wondered how other departments had operated once, sweeps ago, but now that he was learning he did quite dislike it. A quick glance at Harkol, confirmed that the blueblood didn’t share his sentiment.

All of them opened it up, and they were confronted with faces of trolls. Every troll flipped through the pages, looking at each of the faces of the main rebels, deserters, captives, and whatever else they were pursuing. In the back there was a list of names, some that were crossed out, others with symbols, questioning allegiances, or involvement.

“How did they get thiz?” he heard Gartel mutter beside him. “I thought the only captivez killed themzelvez.”

“Indeed, they did. We got more.” the Highblood said. “Unless you’re asking me to get descriptive about the methods I used to get the information out of her — them I guess, but mostly her — just know that it’s from a very valid source.”

Gartel swallowed. No one ever wanted to hear the torture methods subjugglators used to get information. A few select legislacerators were well aware, working with subjugs on occasion, but to hear a subjugglator describe their methods would no doubt be excessive. Imagination was bad enough and purplebloods were raised to be inventive with their tortures.

“When their ships attacked, we boarded some, and borrowed a few of their rebels. Cute little brownblood, whose tongue was quite loose. I personally oversaw the interrogation, trust me when I say she was completely honest. The information here is the list of all the rebels she knew of. The ones we think are involved are marked, she obviously couldn’t give us a list of everyone. We’ve had other informants.”

Gritch looked over the names. He recognized some of them, a few of them in the upper echelons of power. He was sure there was good reason to suspect everyone there, he just didn’t know them.

“The main conspirators and others we are most interested in recovering come with a picture. So you don’t kill them. They are the ones we want alive. The names without symbols may be killed on sight, the ones with should be brought in for further questioning. A few of them have gone missing, those are also helpfully labeled.”

Gritch moved away from the massive main list and to the photos or priority number ones. The first slot was taken by Feferi Peixes. The second slot by a Karkat Vantas, who wore no sign, and Gritch had never heard of the boy before. The next was a Tavros Nitram, the reason why was obvious.
Gritch knew the mutation that plagued the boy, no doubt the Highblood did as well. He was the
spitting image of the Summoner.

He went through the list and had to raise an eyebrow; before he reached the end of the page he saw
Eridan’s name written, an image beside it. He wanted to question why, it wasn’t like Eridan had
gathered any information that would help the rebellion. Nor was he as big of a threat as the other
trolls. He looked over at Preosh who was running her claw along the image in her own folder. She
had a sneer on her face.

“Filona,” the Highblood said, much closer than Gritch remembered. Preosh looked up from her
folder, jumping slightly at the Highblood’s sudden proximity.

“Yes, sir?”

“For the record, I moved him up for you. If you capture him for me I promise you’ll get a worthy
reward.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said, inclining her head demurely. “Honestly, being able to slit his throat would
be reward enough.”

“Just slit his throat? Tsk.” The Highblood shook his head, smiling, and spoke more quietly. Gritch
could still hear him, and wished he couldn’t. “Youngsters these days, always so keen to get the job
done. That’s sweet, but I think I’ll need to instil some more, ah, craftstrollship in you.” He leaned
forward conspiratorially. “Ever really wanted to make your enemies squirm?”

Preosh looked up at him, then back down to the folder in her hands. To most it would seem purely
like she was mentally debating if it would make her happy to watch them squirm. Instead Gritch
knew that she was wondering why she was being singled out, yet again, by the Highblood.

“Depends on the enemy. I don’t know if I want to waste my time on each and every one of them.
Some don’t deserve it.”

The Highblood smiled. “Does he deserve it? He broke your heart, it’s only fair you hurt him in
kind.”

“Maybe, sir,” Preosh said carefully. “I might not be the only one who wants to spend some time with
him again. He wasn’t popular for anything except… well.” She made an illustrative hand gesture. “I
wouldn’t mind being the first to get hold of him. I have a few choice words lined up, and a few
physical punctuation marks for them.” She smiled, hoping her informality was appealing rather than
offensive.

“I wouldn’t mind a moment with him either, zir,” Gartel added when the pause had extended long
enough she was sure of not interrupting the Highblood. “I’m pretty sure he ztole my favourite
jewellery, that waz why he waz under block-arrezt when he went mizzing. Rumour haz it he got the
idea to make a career out of zlutting around and ztarted without telling hiz clientz that waz what they
were. He definitely ztole my time with my quadrantz. And he couldn’t even remember my name, I
mean, really, I only zaw him in clazz every night…”

The Highblood spared Gartel a smile. Gritch hated these worries, he really didn’t want any of his
students to meet their end this way, nor did he want to watch them achieve that death. The
Highblood wasn’t known for clean killings. If people didn’t keep reminding him he would have
forgotten about Eridan’s alleged thievery. Eridan came on to the ship one of the wealthiest young
trolls. He had helped the deserter heiress feed Gl’bgolyb, something that would always be rewarded
handsomely. It didn’t make any sense for him to steal, but it could have been some type of cry for
help. Though it was a pretty dumb one if it was.

“Amporas have always been selfish, thinking they had any right to steal things from people. Items, money, trolls, time, lives,” the Highblood said. “Perhaps a black-team ruin is just what he needs. As long as he’s not dead by the end of it I won’t complain. Especially for being so rude as to fuck you and not even remember your name.” He chuckled. “Once he got to my age, he’d have an excuse for forgetting.”

Gartel’s permanent scowl showed a hint of nervousness, and she leaned slightly away, but the purplish tint to her cheeks betrayed her interest. In contrast, Preosh was grinning, but Gritch could sense her fear.

“Tell me, lieutenants, do you still teach the locations of nerve points? It’s been quite a while since I was in schoolfeeding, I’m not quite up-to-date with it outside my own ship.”

“Of course, sir? Valuable combat knowledge, though we haven’t got onto that with this group yet?…”

“Uh, yeah. I mean, yes, sir, same as what he said. I’ve taken down an enemy or two with that trick.”

“Oh, it has other applications. I suppose information extraction is a bit specialised for your curriculum.”

Gritch wished more than ever that his moirail was alive. He’d been mocked by other seadwellers for taking a maroon moirail, but true pity cared nothing for such things. Of course, he had known she wouldn’t be around for as long as he would, even though she was quite a bit younger; that was the problem in finding serendipity so young, he had gone in knowing he must face centuries without her. He had, however, hoped they’d have a few sweeps more than they’d got; around her eighth wriggling day, she had vanished. He had searched for sweeps, but never found so much as her bones. It still hurt to think of her. Of course his pale quadrant had not gone unfilled in all the sweeps between, but none of them had been Ukuthe Lorain, and right now it was empty of anyone. He distracted himself for the moment by scowling at the foul-smelling rollup dangling from Gartel’s lip.

“Ensign Ravety, I don’t think you can smoke in here.”

“Funny, she seems to be managing,” the Highblood said with a smirk. Preosh and Harkol snickered despite themselves, and even the dour Gartel cracked a smile. Gritch hated that. A troll so terrifying had no business acting like a normal, potentially likeable, troll.

“Perhapz,” Gartel still had a small smile, “there is a way to zpecialize a bit more as time goez on. Maybe if we zhow we have promize.” Despite their spade, Preosh nodded as well, though looking a little less thrilled at the prospect. Gritch had to admit, for all the things he hated about the Highblood, it would be an honor to learn from him. Only if you could guarantee that you’d make it out alive, and without subconscious damage. The Highblood’s smile didn’t waver, and despite looking a little bit like he would devour someone, it looked genuine. Very slightly familiar, too. Gritch put that out of his mind; he must have been imagining things.

“What is this, creep-on-my-students day and nobody told me? Gritch thought to himself. “I-I’m sure my students can prove themselves worthy, sir? They’re the best batch I’ve seen in sweeps, honest? Except for the one bad apple. Aheh.”

“They are surprisingly dedicated. More than I expected when I called all of you in. If they carry on on this path, they might just prove themselves worthy.” The Highblood was looking right at Gritch.
The seadweller nodded, not sure if he should be glad that his students were doing so well.

“Wouldn’t that be… odd,” Gritch said. “Cross trained trolls. Learning anything from other departments, it would be interesting.”

“Maybe it’s something we need to do,” the Highblood said. “The more learned a troll is the better off they are.”

Gritch really didn’t like where this conversation was going, and he could think of no way to move the conversation away from the path it had found itself on, let alone all the the very heretical thoughts he was having about finding a way to rescue Eridan from the fate of dealing with the subjugs. Whatever he’d done, Eridan was still his student.

Absently, he turned the page and saw a very familiar face in the file. A smaller version of a face attached to someone at the table. The file marked him as a captive of the cult. He blinked and looked up. “Uh, sir, I don’t mean to be rude, but would this be…?”

The Highblood sighed. “Yes, that’s Gamzee. A troublesome little wriggler, but yes, my own.” He shook his head theatrically. “I fear the Sufferists won’t be sticking to their message of peace and equality when it comes to him.”

Gritch looked back down at the file, unsure of what he should say to that. He wondered if he was still alive, even. Or if the cult would retaliate for the deaths of their other members. His mind extended to Eridan; perhaps he had been taken captive as well. Maybe he didn’t switch sides, maybe he was abducted, he knew the Heiress on Alternia. Perhaps he was taken to further the cult’s knowledge or perhaps for ransom. Of course, they wouldn’t have much to threaten the Empire with involving Eridan.

He glanced over to the other members of his team. Some were looking over the long list of names, others were looking at the images of the top wanted. Preosh was still looking over Eridan’s picture, some sickness and a lot of rage on her face.

“I hope,” Harkol said softly, “troublesome as he is, we can retrieve him alive for you, sir.”

“I hope we can. I had so many plans for him.” The Highblood sighed again.

There was a gleeful gasp from the other side of the table. The subjugglator group were pointing at something in the file and whispering to each other.

“Yes, that’s right, keya,” said the Highblood, leaning closer to them. “Where they’re heading, everything bleeds dragonfire red. It would be a blasphemy to leave such a beautiful colour inside the ugly little treebeasts it’s in, wouldn’t it?”

“I-I’ve never painted with red before,” murmured Ganmed Lomust.

The Highblood’s grin almost split his face in half. “I have.”

“Can trollz eat theze thingz?” Gartel asked, tilting the blurry photos and squinting at them.

“We can certainly try.”

“Oh, I want one,” Lomust breathed. “I’ll write my spirit’s name on the inside of its skin. In purple ink.”

“Might I ask,” Harkol said slowly, “why the data is slim on the planet. Or do you have any idea?”
“Apparently, it was determined to be useless early on. The recondroids disengaged, and that was all the information they gathered. The beings don’t look dangerous, nor have they given any indication of being difficult to deal with.”

“I notice,” one of the subjugglator mentors said slowly, “that there are two planets listed. Did they manage to cover their tracks, Dyenejar?”

“They did, though we are nearly one hundred percent positive that they are going to the first one listed. We’ve narrowed it down to these two options. The fact the planet is zero-degree no doubt was a drawing factor. Extremists have a tendency to be predictable, and also tend to like symbology.”

“Understood, sir.” The troll went back to silence, and Gritch could only wonder if they were trained to not talk to him, or they just decided not to. Gritch took a look at both of the planets listed; both were fairly unremarkable. One had a sapient life form, the other didn’t. Gritch had to admit, that one seemed more likely than the other. A few perigees’ journey. That was good. It would give him time to think, time to plan and decide what he was going to do on the topic of Eridan. On the other hand, it also meant a few perigees stuck with the Grand Highblood and his followers, and worse, with Harkol. He shuddered involuntarily.

They could see a rough estimate of the cult’s numbers. A fair amount given it would have had to be a collection of conscription-skippers. It wasn’t too odd for a troll to try to skip conscription, what was odd was them surviving. Though Gritch couldn’t help but notice the amount, and there was no real way to tell if the brownblood had perhaps messed with the numbers to make them seem more imposing. Though given their boldness to attack not only a very powerful colony but also SAIGE-40 in the same night, their numbers had to be significant to not mind that kind of loss.

It seemed he wasn’t the only one who thought it was strange. One of the mentors thought to ask the question that no doubt most of the mentors were thinking. “How did they find so many trolls?”

“All I can figure is they recruited young. A trick they learned from the Summoner. They had many of their followers… be conscripted. I’ve checked through the rosters and registrars. Trolls that check in that went missing part way through. Easily faked deaths. They then returned to the cult. It was when their followers who had long term missions went missing we were able to make the obvious connection. Zahhak, Ampora, Lestra, Dorath, et cetera.”

Harkol had leaned close enough, Gritch was sure no one but him could hear him mutter. “They weren’t lying when they said this was his pet project. I didn’t know he was so involved.” Gritch gritted his teeth, and said nothing in return. “It’s not a surprise though, plenty of trolls get cold feet right after conscription, my first kismesis did. Both of us were on the ships, a week later she’d vanished. No one ever heard from her again. What was her name?… Seller? Sahler? No, Sennah Lilura, that was it, I couldn’t remember because she always pronounced it weirdly. Huh, she talked big but I always knew she was a coward. Great rack on her, though.” He grinned and held his hands in a loose gripping motion just above his ears to demonstrate.

Still, Gritch had nothing to say in response. His moirail promised she’d see him as soon as both of them had taken their place. This was back before ships and space. She went to register, told him she got through, and he didn’t see her again. It still stung and he didn’t want anything in common with the blueblood, who was looking at him like they were going to have a conversation. He instead watched two of the purpleblooded mentors talk between themselves at the Highblood’s statement. They seemed locked in a muttered debate. Gritch was trying to make sense of their lips, perhaps he should take up lipreading, if it would help Harkol get the message that they weren’t going to have a conversation.

“Sir,” one of the purpleblooded mentors said. The other mentor rolled his eyes. “Not that I doubt
“...you, or your judgement of character or soul. But…” The Highblood was looking at the subjugglator. “Your progeny, he did get taken quite easily… and…”

Gritch backed up in his seat as the Highblood looked over to to the other subjug. “Finish your thought.”

“Well, is there any chance that perhaps your protege has defected or was a member of the cult?” The Highblood smiled. “Just seeing as he was taken, and they were able to detain him.” The other mentor was obviously nervous to bring this up. Though Gritch had to admit it was a good question, it was best if they were prepared for any outcome. Though judging by the Highblood’s smile this didn’t seem like an outcome they’d have to plan for. The other mentor was looking nervous, but he couldn’t seem to shut up from the hole he was digging. “It’s just they could have recruited him and perhaps he placed himself in a position where he knew he’d get your-

Gritch hadn’t been sure when the Highblood stood and moved; all he knew was the mentor was talking and the next second there was blood splattered on his face, the Highblood holding the mentor’s head in his hand.

“I hope you don’t mind,” the Highblood said to the other Subjugglator mentor in the room. “Taking on an extra batch.”

“No sir, I don’t mind.” His voice sounded steady, which was far more than Gritch could say for his own constitution. He looked around the room, the young recruits looked just as shocked. Gritch decided he wouldn’t look at the corpse. If the amount of blood was any indication, a lot more than just his head had been ripped off.

Some of the young subjugs were cowering, others smirking. Ganmed Lomust was pressing his knuckles against his mouth, concealing a grin, and Gritch could practically see the stars of hero-worship in his eyes. He found himself dreading the day the kid pupated, he was creepy enough without being twice the size of the average non-purpleblood troll - and, from his build, Gritch could guess he was going to be pretty big even by his caste’s usual standards. Harkol nudged him again, pointed at Lomust, and murmured “That kid seriously needs a moirail.”

Gritch made up his mind. Once they landed, he would do everything in his power to find Eridan first. He did not like traitors, but it was precisely because of that that he would not betray his former student in turn. Even if all he could do was give Eridan a quick death, he would do it. Eridan had been his responsibility, and Gritch had failed him by not noticing something was wrong and trying to bring him back to the side of the Empire, so he owed him one.
> hello?
> do you remember me?
> little captor?

> yeah, you have enough time two chat or ii2 the waterbiitch around?

> ii d_o have 2_ome tiime, 2h_e’2 n_ot n_ear m_e. ii2 th_ere 2_omethiing y_ou n_eed, l_iittle
c_aptor?

> ii wa2 wondering where the fleet wa2. general coordiinate2, iif you had them, then ii ju2t kiind ofwanted two talk two you. ii gue22 ii think ii’t 2 hliitty two be a helm2man. and ii’d be prettyfuckiing lonely, 2o maybe you could u2e 2omeone other than the empre22 two talk two.

> wh_at w_ould y_ou kn_ow of a h_elm2man’2 l_ife, l_iittle iinn_ocent?

> enough two know iiit fuckiing hurt2. ii had two piilot our getawey 2hiip.

> y_ou 2_a_criifiiced y_our fr_eedom f_or y_our fr_iend2? e2c_ape?

> actually, no.

> wh_at?

> eq and ii managed two fiix up a temporary riig. pretty fuckiing awe2ome, raight? ii thought iiit wa2iimpo22ible, but ii2eem2 two work.

> not a2 effiiciant a2 the permanent one, but we’re fiiddliing wiith it a2 we go, we can get enough2peed from iiit two e2cape. help2 that ii’m not poweriing a whole battlehiip, ju2t a tug.

> eq?

> equiiu2 zahhak, our re2iident mechaniic.

> z_ahhak? ii’t 2tr_ange th_at y_ou w_ould kn_ow 2_omeone w_iith th_at n_ame.

> diid you? before you became a helm2man, that ii2.

> ii diid, only in p_a22iing. h_ow m_any of y_ou ar_e th_ere?

> twelve iiin total. not much of a rebelliion ii’ll admiit. ii don’t know why ii am telling you thii2, youcould tell the empre22.

> ii b_ et 2h_e alr_eady kn_ow2. and tr ust m_e wh_en ii 2_ay ii h_ave n_o d_esiire tw_o h_elp h_er
m_ore th_an ii h_ave tw_o. my p_o2t ii2 an ext_ended pr_i2on 2_entence.

> ii bet miine would be two. gz2ay2 iiif we’re caught he’2 goiing two kiill u2 all before they can takeu2 iiin.

> gz ii2 gamzee makara, or our re2iident headache.
>m_akara? as in h_e’2 r_elated tw_o h_er p_et?

>yeah, but we don’t talk about that… he went through a lot of 2hiit when he wa2 conscriipted. iit’s kind of no go territory unle22 you want hiim two try two kiill you.

>.

>you 2tiill connected two the feed or ha2 thii2 2hiitty connectiion fiinally caught up two u2? fuck, ii 2hould 2ee about fixiing thii2, but our 2uppliies are 2hiit as it i2.

>you 2tiill there?

>y_e2. j_u2t h_ad tw_o 2h_ut 2_omething d_own.

>iit h_a2 b_een a l_ong t_iime 2_iince ii t_alked tw_o a tr_oll th_at w_a2n’t h_er. ii d_on’t iiint_end tw_o l_eave y_ou any t_iime s_oon iif ii c_an h_elp ii.  
>i rundown2and, ii’m j ust s_urprised tw_o h_ear ii. ii h_ope h_e k_eeps th_at pr_omii2e f_or y_our 2_ake, y_oung c_aptor.

>ar_e y_ou m_akiing any g_aiing aw_ay fr_om th_e fl_eet? ii d_on’t w_ant tw_o tr_ack y_ou f_or f_ear th_at it wi_ll al_eet h_er.

>yeah, we’re not doiing two bad.

>excu2e me a moment, miinor meat2pace problem calliing.

Sollux sighed and looked away from the computer, snapping “Guyth! Could you argue thomewhere elthe?”

Eridan looked shamefaced. “Sorry, sorry. Just a minor disagreement.” He oozed up to Tavros and slipped an arm around him. “Right, my sweedidaim, my palest?”

“See, this is the problem,” Tavros said, unhooking Eridan’s arm. “I have problems too and you can’t just, uhh, hug them away. I helped you with yours, but I don’t feel you’re, really, giving anything back. And it’s not that I don’t like the attention, but, sometimes, I like to be able to move, without dragging you along.”

“Theriouthly, I’m in the middle of thomething, go dithagree thomewhere elthe.”

“As if this is the wworst thing you’ve coded through.”

“I’m not coding, juth go away.”

“God, you’re such a wwhiner, Sol.” Eridan rolled his eyes, turning his attention back to Tavros. “I’m sorry, Taw, but I am tryin’ to help you.”

“No, you’re hugging me, you’re not listening to me. There is actually a difference.”

A psionic beam reached out and shoved both Eridan and Tavros out of the control room, their shoes screeching against the metal drowned out by Sollux’s yell of “For the latth time, take it the fuck outthide, or next time by ‘outthide’ I’ll mean the airlock!”

>2orry two keep you waititi. 2hiipmates beiing a paiin, palemate2’ tiiff.
>dammiit, 2orry, ii gue22 ii 2houldn’t complaiin about trouble2ome 2hiipmate2 two you.

>a2 m_undane as ii m_u2t 2_ound tw_o y_ou, h_aviiing a n_ormal c_onver2atiion ii2 a r_eliief.
ii am curious about why you’re waiting for your time talking to a lowly human. 
other than for help, of course.

and i would forgive the first and talk to me in deep of just about anything.
i thought you might want some company.
and i can’t hurt two have you on our side, right?

ii supposed it’s good for that reason too.
tell me of your friend. i would like to hear of the rebellion. little do you know it is.
well, me you obviously know about, and i told you about gz and eq. our leader’s karkat vantas, 
supposed descendant of the sufferer. the cult made him stay back, and he made us stick with him.

vantas? i supposed it’s been long since i heard that name. red blood?

yeah.

there supposed about it, little captor. that is the trueigiil of the sufferer. i hope him ancestor’s blessing may go with you.
thanks. wait, do you remember the sufferer?
i have lived for a very long time. true when i say doesn’t let go of toy easily. i remember him very fondly.

ii something you want to know about? the story is quite sad, really.

know he was a great troll.
that’s quite a long life. if you do remember his rebellion, maybe you can give us advice on how not two meet the same end. we’re mostly shooting in the dark and hoping it turns out okay.
unle two would hurt you two talk about. i really am not into two crippling you emotionally. too much sympathy for your po2t.
god this twoound2 shitty, ii mean ii want you two look forward two talking two me, not hate me for digging up emotional 2car2.
i’m crap with troll2, sorry.
maybe ii should talk two my moirail.

who ii your moirail? the vantaboy, or does he transcend the quadrant as his forebear did?

no, iit’re not him. once but not now. why?

j u2t a g ue22. iif n ot h iim, wh o?

ok, this ii going two sound awful, but 2he’t nothing like her ance2tor, ii 2wear.
iit’t referi. the prince22. 2he’t here two.

>.
> * * *

>what wa2 that?
ii’m sorry. ii jut nothing. jut an interesting twit of fate.

th’at’2 odd, b ut h ow odd ii d on’t th’ink y ou’ll ev er und er2tand. ii d on’t th’ink y ou or e ar e tw o t’errible w ith oth er tr oll2, h ave f aiith iin y our2elf. y ou h ave n o on e tw o tw o im pr e22 h ere, ii’m b a2iically a 2 entiient 2hiip.

gue22.

ii suppo2e ii 2hould, iit’2 all weir ed though. talki ng two you, ii mean. ii know ii 2hould be wor ried 2he’2 lii2teni ng, or ii gue22 readi ng iin on thii2, but ii tru2t you.

everything about my li fe ha2 gotten weir ed. thi2 que2ti on mi ght 2eem out of place, but ii2 there anyway you’d tell me about you before you became a 2hiip?

l ittle en ough tw o t’ell. ii w a2 a r evolution ary, ii b elieved th e t eachi ng2 of th e 2 ufferer. w e f ai led.

th e 2 ufferer m et hi2 end, a2 ii’m 2 ure y ou kn ow. th e d ii2ci ple w a2 ex iiled, h e r w ould-b e ex ecuti oner w ith th e d ied, th e d oloro2a en2iaved, and th e p2 ion iic 2l ai in.

p2 ion iic diied, then? th e culti2t2 2aiid hi2 body wa2 ne ver 2een. mo2t of th em thought he diied iin th e dungeon2 or iin battle.

L r - lereal bel2aii - he thought he e2cap ed, but we diidn’t beli eve hiim.

p2 iion iic d iied, in deed. ii w ihtne22ed h i2i2 p a22i ng fr om th ii2 w orld. ii am 2 orry, l ittle c ap tor. ii r ecogni2ed y our m ark a2 h i2.

iit’2 okay. not li ike ii expected any different.

w ould h ave d ied on th e fl og gi ng j ut a2 w ell, b ut th e e mpre22 f ound m e. ii m ii2tak enly th ought ii h ad th e r’ight tw o r efu2e h er r ed adv an ce2, and th u2 earn ed m y c ur rent 2 it u ation.

2h e w ii2hed tw o t e2t th e n’ew eng i ne d e2iign. ii h ave th e h onour of b ei ng alt er niia’2 f irt h elmsman.

2h e c annot h ave m y p ity, but 2h e g ot wh at 2h e w ant ed fr om m e.

Sollux’s hands slipped on the keys. He stared at the screen and the blinking cursor where he was supposed to be writing something, but he didn’t know exactly how to respond to what he just found out. He never platonically pitied a troll more than he did at this moment. Somewhere in his mind he quickly indexed everything he knew about the Empress; it renewed a fire in him to have Feferi take over. To never have another Helmsman who wasn’t detachable, to never have to hear another story like this again.

ii… ii honetly don’t know what two 2ay two that. ii want two 2ay ii’m 2orry but ii2 eems li iet’2 not enough. but ii am, th at’2 2hiitty, th at’2 more th an 2hiitty, th at’2 2omethi ng ii can’t put int wo word2.

we if we wi in, ii promi2e you won’t have two do thii2 anymore.

Sollux’s hands slipped on the keys. He stared at the screen and the blinking cursor where he was supposed to be writing something, but he didn’t know exactly how to respond to what he just found out. He never platonically pitied a troll more than he did at this moment. Somewhere in his mind he quickly indexed everything he knew about the Empress; it renewed a fire in him to have Feferi take over. To never have another Helmsman who wasn’t detachable, to never have to hear another story like this again.
>ii don't want two ju2t call you helm2man, or hm. ii want 2omething real two call you. but ii have another one of tho2e que2tions you don't have two answer iif you don't want two.

>h_elm2man iiis f_iine, l_iittle c_aptor. 2p_eaking tw_o y_ou h_a2 b_een th_e h_iight of my d_ay. ii'm n_ot ab_out tw_o 2pl_iit h_aiir2 ov_er wh_at y_ou c_all m_e.
>bu_t wh_at ii2 y_our q_ue2tion?

>when you helped me the fiir2t tiime, you made me promii2e we wouldn't get caught. not that ii am ru2hing intwo that 2hiit2torm anytiime 2oon. it ii2 a pretty ea2y promii2e two keep.
>bu_t you 2aiid 2omethiing about not 2eeiing iit againi. or haviing iit happen againi.
>ii’ve been wonderiing what you meant by that 2iince you 2aiid it…
>doe2 iiit have two do wiith the whole floggiing jut thiing or 2hould ii be worriied about 2omethiing el2e?
>
>
>
>
>
>
>Sollux watched the dots flicker on the screen, one by one, faster and faster, like a fearful heartbeat.

>ii
>ii t_old y_ou wh_at 2h_e d_iid.
>ii am n_ot th_e only on_e. 2h_e t_alkt wo me. t_ell2 m_e of h_er g_ame2.
>and th_ere w_a2 a g_iirl. ab_out y_ou ag_e. 2h_e f_ound h_er. br_ought h_er t_wo m_e.
>2_aid 2h_e w_a2 our2. 2h_e m_ay h_ave b_een r_iight.
>2h_e w_a2 b_arely an ad_ult eiith_er way. 2h_e wa2n’t r_eady f_or wh_at h_appended.
>ii w_a2n’t r_eady f_or wh_at h_appended.

>her game2?
>you mean… oh fuck.

>2he w_a2 k_iilled, 2h_e m_ade h_er2elf b_e k_iilled.
>if ii th_ought ii2 m_ade h_er2elf b_e k_iilled.
>but ii c_ouldn’t l_et th_at b_e y_ou.
>ii c_ouldn’t h_old on anymore iif ii2 h_appended ag_aiin.
>ii2 w_ould b_e w_or2e th_iime tw_o.
>ii d_on’t th_iink 2h_e’d l_et y_ou d_iie.

>her game2?
>you mean… oh fuck.

>ii hon2tly diidn’t thiink thiis would go here. ii’m 2orry for bringing it up.
>ii 2hould know better with gz’2 2hiit.
>ii’m 2orry for takiing you back there… ii diidn’t mean two hurt you, or cau2e any 2traiin.
>if you want ii i_can go now.

>n_o, n_o, ii2 g_oof f_or y_ou tw_o kn_ow. 2h_e w_oun’t 2t_op unl_e2 e2 2h_e end2.
>y_ou ar_e a ch_allenge f_or h_er… ii g_ue22 all of y_ou ar_e a ch_allenge f_or th_em.
>wh_at th_e2y’ll d_o iif th_e2y c_at ch y_ou w_oun’t b_e ov_er q_uikcly.
>th_e2y dr_ag outh tw_e on_e2 th_e2y d_on’t h_ave an iny_e2tment iin.
>ii c_an’t b_egin tw_o iiim_agiine wh_at th_e2y’ll d_o tw_o y_ou.
The dots appeared once more, and Sollux typed four messages frantically, deleting each one, knowing it wasn’t enough, the Helmsman didn’t sound calm about this. He couldn’t seem to think of anything that would change that. All he could think about was his and Aradia’s conversation with Gamzee. Was there a chance that she was with them, this mysterious girl that spun the Helmsman off into a fit Sollux had no idea how to comfort? Each dot was blinking by faster and faster. Sollux couldn’t begin to imagine the horror of this Helmsman’s life, and there he was being a douchebag bringing it up. He could always see if there was a way to pass a message to the other side for him. Maybe that would help? It was worth a try, it was better than any other idea he had at present.

>hm, lii2ten. gz went through 2omethiing 2iimiilar, he e2cape2d… my mate2priit can 2ee and talk two the dead. according two her and gz, there ii2 a pretty good chance her ghost ii2 wiith u2, iiif 2he did2n’t move on.
>ii can ask aa two 2end a me22age from you two her. or 2omethiing. ii don’t know how two help you, but ii am going two fuckiing try. Or 2hould ii ju2t go now?

>iiit ii2 l_iikely 2h_e c_ould n_ot m_ove on. th_e empr_e22’ p_et l_ike2 tw_o c_ollect th_eiir d_ead pr_ey.
>ii d_on’t kn_ow wh_at ii c_ould 2_ay. ii c_annot iim_agiine ii c_ould h_elp h_er n_ow.
>ii c_ould d_o n_othiing th_en
>wh_en
>th_e empr_e22
>m_ade h_er
>m_ade m_e
>.
>.
>.
>l_aneen

The program kicked Sollux back to the main menu. He was looking at a locked down Helmsman screen. He could do nothing but stare at the message for a long moment, trying to comprehend what had just happened, how all this had happened. He damned his curiosity the moment he had himself back in the present, before he began typing like mad.

Massive lockdown meant that something that he or the Helmsman did was against the Empress’ rules and he was awaiting her to check over what he did. Which meant reading that log, which meant the useless bitch would know what they talked about. Sollux cursed himself again, his fingers tapping on keys so quickly he had to go back and fix obvious mistakes. He tried to calm himself down this would go faster if he just kept a level head. His bloodpusher wasn’t helping, and the nervous jitter that shot through his limbs wasn’t helping either.

He didn’t know how much time either of them had, and he wasn’t going to be the reason the Helmsman— no, the troll who was cruelly wired into a rig, suffered on his behalf. He took a breath and typed, resolving himself to stop making mistakes, there was no time for mistakes. He had a program to crack and at the very most only five minutes to do it in.

Through one lock screen and then another he trudged, through the defenses, reaching dead ends every other second. This troll he had been talking to was a member of their rebellion as much as any of his friends. He wouldn’t let them suffer, nor would he let a troll he’d never met face to face.

His forearms were cramping by the time he deleted the log, and all the instances of him hacking into this area to delete it. He exited out and took a breath, before cradling his forehead in his hands. This regime needed to go down, he already knew that, but he had a new resolve. He wanted that bitch that everyone called the Empress to hurt the way she had made other trolls hurt.
“Sollux?” Aradia’s voice alerted him, and he looked up. She was standing in the doorway, the flesh side of her face drawn into an expression of concern. “Are you okay?”

“… Not really.”
Chapter 25

Tavros walked into the first bunkblock. Eridan was sitting on one of the tiny bunks, a book in his hand. “Hey, Eridan, could we uh, talk about something?”

Eridan looked up quickly; it was obvious he was nervous. Tavros decided that perhaps that wasn’t the best way to start a conversation. But he had a moirail now, and he’d really needed to talk about it. He had felt, as he was sure most everyone had felt, like they were being pulled twenty different directions. Every moment they had of peace was always surrounded by the fact they knew something terrible was going to happen.

It had been a few days without incident and they were all getting nervous. But the tenacity of a troll was based on whether or not they could get through something that was near, looming over them, and still live their lives in something close to normal.

“It’s not bad, I promise. Just, uh, I’ve been needing to talk to someone about this for awhile.”

“Stop what I’m here for, Taw.” Eridan shuffled up to let Tavros sit down. “What’s the matter?”

Tavros sat down, sighed, and leaned against the wall, careful not to crush his wings. “It’s about...Tsukey Morney.”

Eridan’s brow furrowed. “Girl from the Sufferist caves? The one with the logbeast lusus? Sorry, I didn’t know her that well.”

“I did.”

“Oh,” Eridan looked nervous for a moment. “Did you know her, in a friendship way or maybe a romantic kind of way?”

“It’s kind of complicated... I liked her a lot.”

“Oh. Oh...” Eridan said suddenly. “I see, well did you do anything, and now you’re havin’ regrets? Or do you feel bad because you never told her and now you can’t?”

“Uhh, not like...” Tavros sighed. He really didn’t want to talk to Eridan about past pale crushes when their moirallegiance was young and feeble, and as far as Tavros could tell getting sicker by the day. “Pailing a lot. Just sort of liked her, she was a really nice girl. She was really impressionable. Or I, uhh, thought so. She took so much of what Lereal said to heart. Well, she looked like it at least. She never said much. I’ve, uhh, been thinking about her a lot. I know she wasn’t on the one ship we were sure got away. But she might have gotten away. Though, I kind of uhh, doubt it. I just feel like I could have done more.”

“To stop her from gettin’ on the ships?” Eridan shook his head. “Sorry, Taw, but Lereal threatened everyone else. Being close friends with you and Kar, saved my skin from goin’. Not that they would have wanted a, what was it... Lereal compared me to a sponge. Said I had the backbone a’ one. Or somethin’ like that. You couldn’t have done much. So, no point in mopin’ over it.”

Tavros stared at Eridan for a moment, before sighing. He understood that Eridan had his own style of pacifying, but that was ridiculous. Eridan’s hand coiled with his, and it took a moment for Tavros to let his own fingers curl back instead of just having Eridan hold his hand with no reciprocation.

Eridan took this as an invitation to move closer, and soon Tavros found himself with the seadweller’s
icy body pressing into his side. “Um, Eridan, not that I don’t appreciate the affection, but don’t you think you’ve become a bit... clingy lately?”

“Sorry,” Eridan said, backing off. “It’s just, um... no, I shouldn’t talk about my problems wwhen you’re talking about yours. Go on.”

Tavros knew what he meant, anyway. It had been a long time since Eridan had any body contact which didn’t end in pain. Tavros didn’t really mind helping him out there, but it would have been more fun and less like a chore if Eridan gave back a bit more. He hated to admit it, but treacherous little voices in his head had also been whispering that Eridan had nothing to complain about in comparison to Gamzee. Rationally he knew that just because someone else had worse problems didn’t mean Eridan’s didn’t matter, but then he wasn’t listening to Gamzee talk about his problems constantly. From what he’d heard Karkat was having the opposite problem... He pushed that out of his mind. Gamzee wasn’t his moirail and wasn’t ready to have anyone as a matesprit, so it was none of Tavros’ business.

Tavros sighed and wrapped an arm around Eridan. “Compromise?” he offered. Eridan gave a little smile and nod. “It’s kind of awkward to talk to you about this. I mean I’m talking about a pale crush but... Well, uhh, I’m sure you understand wishing you could have done one thing different. I just think about if we could have had enough time to rescue her... or uhh, maybe all of them. Leave before Lereal could take the ships.”

Eridan leaned his head on Tavros’ shoulder. “Don’t knoww howw it wwould hawe wworked. Wwe barelwy hawe enough supplies as it is. I mean wwe’re startin’ to run out of food. Sol and Wris are bein’ really unhelpful wwith tellin’ us howw close wwe are. Wwe might hawe rescued them from a quick death against the fleet only to hawe them all starwe to death. Maybe it’s better things happened the wway they did?”

Tavros in his heart knew that Eridan was probably right. But still -- he wished the seadweller would humor him a bit. Maybe give him a completely unrealistic happy end, Tavros knew life didn’t work the way it did in his fairy tales. That didn’t stop him from wishing he could hear another ending.

“It’s just well, I mean... I just wish we could have saved more of them, like convinced them to take over the other ships, load them up with supplies and, uhh, they could meet us there. It was so pointless, I mean all of them were slaughtered for no reason.”

“There wwas a reason just a stupid one. Lereal’s owwn blindness got them killed. Too bad he had a quick death. I ain’t one to wwish torture on anyone, but if any troll deserved it he did. Sent a bunch of kids to a lost battle. I’m sure she didn’t suffer too long. It’s not much of a consolation, but she probably didn’t get it too bad.”

“What if she did, though? Some of the ships were boarded. What if her’s, uhh, was? I mean what happened to Gamzee was terrible, I can’t imagine any of them going through it. Gamzee’s at least a highblood, and, uhh, bigger... Not that, that makes it better, but uhh, it does make it a little less terrible. They were all so small and she was sort of, uhh, I can’t think of a good word... odd. Not in a bad way, just different, and I suspect that the Subjugs wouldn’t have, uhh, liked it much. She used to freak out if people touched her at all, it took weeks for me to just hold her hand. I hate to think what they might have done...”

“All of them had their reasons for runnin’ off. I don’t think any of the adults would care for any of them much. If they were goin’ to abduct any troll, should have been Lereal and his close goons. Might as well interrogate him and them, rather than a bunch of kids just doin’ what their told at threat of -- You knoww, it’s funny, Lereal became everythin’ the Empire wwas. Just wwithout the resources.”
“Is that some, uh, funny cruel twist of ironic fate?”

“No, but it might say somethin’ about the nature a trolls. I mean, I agree with Fef on plenty. Disagree wwith her on plenty too. But I don’t think a society founded on cuddling wwill last long.”

“I think she’s, uhh, grown up a bit beyond that.” Tavros fidgeted a bit from where he was sitting, this conversation shouldn’t be as awkward as it felt. Not if they wanted to get anywhere in their new relationship. He chalked it up to the fact that they were talking about other quadrants, and that was an awkward topic anyway. Made a little worse with the fact it was an ex-moi--mat--kis--an ex and a moirail-hopeful. That no doubt amplified the whole weirdness level.

“Wwell, guess wwe could look on the bright side,” Eridan said. “If she hadn’t gone, you wwoudn’t have me noww.” The silence from Tavros informed him this had not been the right thing to say. “Okay, that was a terrible thing to say. I don’t knoww wwhat to tell you, Taw.”

“I don’t, uhh, know what I want to hear either but that wasn’t exactly it.” Tavros sighed. “I think we’re all getting, uhh, cabin fever. It’s making all of us more, uhh, easy to annoy.”

“Maybe, I didn’t mean it that wway though. I didn’t mean I’m glad she’s dead so you and I could be together.”

“I know, you just have, uhh, a terrible way with words.” Tavros nodded. “Maybe we should just move on to another topic for a bit?”

“It might help, to talk about somethin’ else for awhile... I don’t really knoww wwhat though.” Eridan looked thoughtful, Tavros could feel that hint of nervousness from the both of them. Their moirallegiance wasn’t going to be perfect right off the bat. It would have been ridiculous to assume that they would be anywhere near what Equius and Nepeta had, or even Karkat and Gamzee. Every diamond bloomed in their own time.

Yet, Tavros could feel it. They were struggling to honestly talk with each other, fighting themselves to do normal things moirls did. Not that Tavros blamed Eridan or himself for all of those shortcomings. They couldn’t truly make a pile. They didn’t have all of the resources to make this a full attempt. Tavros wondered if maybe, those things were in place to make the beginnings easier. Either that or Eridan and him weren’t exactly meant for each other.

“How have you been doing with all the, uhh, research?”

“Pretty good, there is a lot to read. But so far it’s helpin’ quite a bit.” Eridan’s hand raised up to Tavros’ and began to play with each of his fingers. “Wwe’re kind of terrible at this moirail thin’, aren’t wwe?” At least Tavros wasn’t alone in the feeling of awkwardness between them. Then again, they did just sort of dive right into a really hard topic. Not only about past crushes, but also death.

That thought had never been far from anyone on the ships’ minds. If a drone ship showed up, there was a good chance that all of them would be dead. Actually, if any part of the Alternian fleet showed up they’d be done for. If part of any Empire showed up, dead. If they ran into pirates, dead. If they managed to make it to their location, no doubt all of them would relax a bit. Right now there were too many enemies, the ship didn’t have any weapons. All of them thought this was akin to going out for a long walk on Alternia without their weapons.

Stress was either going to make them sick, or going to do the job and kill them.

“No, I don’t think we’re terrible, just there is so much, uhh, going on that it’s difficult for any of us to interact in any relationship normally. Look at Equius and Nepeta. I’ve never seen their relationship
falter, you get us out here and things get even, uhh, harder. We’re giving it an honest try.”

“I guess that’s all we can do. Taw, maybe we should get some sleep, clear our heads and finish up this conversation later.” Tavros nodded, feeling distinctly like this was a bit of a brush off. Someway for Eridan to avoid the weirdness between them. Not that Tavros blamed him, he agreed. They probably just needed a reset, or something else. Both of them curled up close to each other. Willing themselves to go to sleep, not finding it before others had joined them in the room and curled up themselves and found sleep themselves.

~

“Guyth. Guyth... GUYTH!” Sollux was basically screaming to wake any of the other trolls up.

“Whaa?” Vriska said sitting up, looking towards the console. “It’s too early.”

“We’re near the boundarieth of... Yurth? Ehareth? Their language makes no thenthe. We’re going to be entering the their thythtem. Thoon. If they have defenthes, it’th all handth on deck.”

Vriska pulled herself up to her feet, nudging the other trolls with her foot as she walked towards the console. It would have been easier to wake them up by kicking them, but they had some terribly pressing business. Entering into the ring of space junk was usually where most systems hid the vast majority of their defenses, and they apparently got there while everyone was sleeping.

“How far are we off?”

“Not long. Onthe we enter, we thhill have too long until we reach the planet...”

“We’ll cross the bridge when we get there. Right now let’s make it through the junk and get into some measurable distance from their star.”

“What’s going on?” Karkat was pretending to be more awake than he was. His near-constant yawning and sleepy eyes were giving him away.

“We’re entering into the ring of space junk just outside their star system.” Vriska spoke quickly, delivering the news in brief facts. “There is a chance that if this planet is in their space stage they have defenses. We’re in the backwoods of the Empire, so we don’t have to worry about their bits. Just this planet's own defenses, and perhaps spy drones from other Empires.”

“If there are any. Which there may not be.”

“But there could be. Got it. Should I make sure everyone is up while the both of you navigate?”

“We might need everyone to buckle in. This ship doesn’t have guns, defenses, anything. All we have is evasion, and Sollux.”

“I’ll juth plug myself in. We thhould probably refrethth the charge anyway. You’ll have to let me know what you thee, VK, thince thith ithn’t a full rig I can’t thee the way you’ll be able to.”

“Got it.”

The ship was now awake and tense; if this planet had defenses this could be the end. It was now their only option, with dwindling supplies and another bout of shitty luck. It wouldn’t surprise them in the slightest if droneships, piloted fighters, or anything else popped up and took them down once and for all.
It would have been great to say they all held their breath, waiting, for them to pass through. But the distance was quite large, and all of them could hear Sollux’s strained but forced even breathing. The ship jumped forward slightly, and all of them looked towards the window, and to Vriska.

“Buckle in, grubs. We might have to do more evasion than just the space shit floating around out here. The buddy system still works, so find your partner and get comfy, this might take a while. Also, if there are any last goodbyes you wanted to say, now might be the time. I could miss something shooting at us, so say your last words. Oh, and one seat open next to me if anyone doesn’t want to buddy up and hasn’t worn full face paint in their lives.”

All of them got to their respective seats, sitting with their quickly-decided partners from take off. Vriska was up at the controls, carefully scanning the outside looking for anything that might attack them, flying smoothly through the field of meteors and other junk that littered the outskirts of their star system.

“You doing okay, Gamzee?” Karkat whispered. Gamzee nodded. He still wasn’t entirely happy about extended close contact, but he could handle it.

Vriska was dead silent other than the occasional clicking from her tongue The whole of the flight deck looked towards the window and waited for any kind of indication of the final part of any journey. If they did run into fighterships from this planet, that could truly be the end.

“Sollux?”

“Yeah, VK?”

“I don’t know your limits, but could you just slam us through here?”

“We’re going at fast as we can. It’s literally phythicaly impothible for uth to move fathter. That’s the only reathon thith hathn’t taken thweepth, that and wormholeth.”

“I just would rather be in open space again. I don’t like all these ice objects and the idea that something might sneak up on our unsuspecting asses. If we had cannons or guns or anything... Just asking.”

“It’s okay, VK. Thith thing can’t be too thick. Pluth, the objecth aren’t ath clothe ath thome other junk belth.” The flight deck was once again silent. It seemed like hours passed and it probably was. All of them were quiet, as Vriska kept moving them through the collections of ice, making sure they didn’t hit anything. All of them were quietly waiting for anything to show up, hoping it would board instead of just shoot them down.

The computer beeped, and a low hum admitted from the onboard communications hub. The hum turned into a series of beeps, some longer than other’s matching the tone of the hum dropping lower and higher. The trolls all looked at each other trying to figure out what it was. Vriska was oddly silent, looking down at the computer.

“I think, we might be getting a message... Like from something, but this isn’t in anything that makes sense... Wait... Waaaaaaaait.” All of the trolls accepted the new silence, hoping for an update, or anything that Vriska might have to say at this point. The hum was still echoing around the room. “Yeah, I got nothing. It seems really fucking random. Like they decided to mash code or something... Maybe it’s their base coding language? I have no idea. Sollux, you can look at it once we’re out of here. But... It doesn’t make a bit of sense. Why would we receive something like this? You’d think if it was a warning it would kick on our communicators and tell us to turn back now, or something.”
“Maybe they’re still only exploring their thar thythtem. Maybe thith ith thome type of methage to athk if they are alone in the univerthe? Which ith pretty thtupid. Do they know how big the univerthe ith? It’d be thtupid to think they were the only thentient planet.”

“Maybe this is how they are trying to communicate with us? Or any “aliens”... I just realized how weird it was to think of all of us as aliens. Guess we’ll have to get used to it.”

“That humming really needth to thtop, it’th fucking with my own particular frequenthy. It’th annoying too.”

“Some day I should ask you how your psionics work, but then I remember I don’t care. I’ll mute it. Once I figure out how. Ah, there’s the lovely mute button.” The humming stopped. “We actually should be out of the belt soon, my vote is we’re not going to run into anything. I think the Are-th message is our only excitement for the evening. So if everyone agrees let’s unbuckle and I’ll get us the final few Drodala.”

“If that’s Vriska’s idea, I’m happy to agree. Everyone unbuckle,” Karkat said. “Plus, I’m sure no one likes being crammed into those seats any longer than they have to be.” He pulled off the belt and stood up; the others quickly followed suit, all of them standing and stretching, each casually checking the public clock that told them they had been sitting there for a few hours. Sollux had warned them that the time would be off, since they were traveling so fast time started to lose relevance.

“I’m going to stay plugged in for a bit, or until VK giveth me the all clear.”

“Well, you can obviously talk in the rig, so meeting. We’re all here anyway.”

“What do you want to talk about, Young Suffering?”

“Vriska, stop calling me that.”

“No.”

“Fuck, fine, more important things to do than bicker with you.” Karkat took a breath. “How far are we from the planet?”

“Around 2.9 Drozela. Or an obscene amount of Paga from it. Let’s just say we’ve got some time,” Vriska said after a pause.

“Okay, supplies-wise how are we looking?”

“Down to the dregs, I’m afraid,” Vriska said flatly. “We didn’t want to say earlier in case we ran out, didn’t want to scare everyone. It’s better than we thought, we won’t die en route, but we’ll need to go carefully with the food and water till we land.”

“We already were being ‘careful’,” Eridan scoffed.

“Says the one whose blood colour can survive longest without food next to Feferi,” Karkat muttered. “If you weren’t Gamzee’s ashmate I might suggest we eat you.”

“Hey, Equ’s got more meat on than me, why not him first?”

“Interrupting all of you. We’re all clear, we’re within the star’s orbit now,” Vriska said, standing up from the controls. She took a moment before she turned and joined the rest of the group. “The meeting can now continue.”
Sollux unstrapped himself, and moved over to the center console. He looked over the message for a long moment, before cocking his head to the side. “Thith lookth like corrupt beenary. We can jutht delete it, it’th corrupted.” He pressed a few buttons on the console, erasing the message history. “A two million beeyte methage that’s corrupted. Wow. I hope thith ithn’t a reflection of their thpthies. They code worthe than KK.”

“Any signs of defenses? Outposts? Anyone at all we might run into? I’m getting kind of creeped out by the lack of attack.”

“Nothing.” Sollux frowned. “Lookth like thith thpethieth hathn’t even figured out how to get off-planet yet... If they haven’t, then when we land that could be really good or really bad.”

“Well, we weren’t planning to make a big show of landing anyway. Guess we’ll find somewhere relatively underpopulated, try to stay hidden, and if all else fails beg for sanctuary and hope the natives aren’t too territorial.”

Gamzee peered out of the window. “Hey, guys, guys! Look!” The trolls gathered, and their eyes widened as they took their first look at their destination. From this distance the planet was a soft bluegreen, swirls of white cloud flowing over it. It was beautiful, and not just that; they were still hungry and exhausted, still missing their home, but they felt their hearts filled with a new rush of hope. Enough to get them through the last leg of their journey, hard as it may be.

Tavros glanced sideways at Gamzee, and thought he might burst with the relieved joy when he realised that, for the first time since before conscription, he was seeing Gamzee truly smiling.

~~~

**Drodala** n. a unit of measurement. The distance between Alternia and her moons or 13074.82 paga. (measures 384,400 km | 238,900 mi)

**Drozela** n. a unit of measurement. The distance between Alternia and her sun or 389 Drodala (dd) (measures 149.6e+5 km | 92.96e+4 mi)
“Uhh, Gamzee, can we talk for a moment?”

Gamzee stopped staring into space and looked up, still holding the scalemate. “Whatcha need, Tav?”

“Uhh, well, it’s just a thing… Eridan and I are… well, we’re having some problems.”

Gamzee nodded. Everyone on the ship had heard their arguments, and seen how Eridan would pour on the metaphorical sugar afterwards. He’d been tempted to step in, but Tavros seemed to be handling it fine on his own, and Gamzee was sure he wouldn’t have appreciated someone butting in. Besides, he’d promised Feferi…

“And I think I should break up with him, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

“What? Why?”

“I, uhh, I know you’ve been leaving him alone as much for my sake as Nepeta’s. I don’t want you getting some idea about, um, avenging me or something. But on the other hand, uhh, we all know how his breakups tend to turn out, so some, uhh, moral support would be good… Just don’t hurt him, okay?”

“Already promised I wouldn’t, but I’ll promise again. It’s your quadrants, and you know best what you want for yourself. If it’s not working don’t think you got to keep on keeping on with something that makes you unhappy because of me. I won’t hurt the little fishstick, especially if you’re breaking up with him because he isn’t right for you. I’m here for you bro, always have been and always will be.”

There was a knock at the door, and Eridan peered in nervously. “Um, Taw?” He looked at Gamzee, already poised to run in case the purpleblood attacked. “I… I sorta got somefin I wanna talk about, please don’t be mad?”

Tavros examined Eridan’s expression, and smiled a little. “I, uhh, well… if it’s what I think it is, I promise I won’t get mad. I think, um, I may have been planning to say the same thing.”

Eridan sat beside them, and looked sideways at Gamzee. “Uh, Gam, not meanin’ to be difficult but this is kinda between me and Taw, okay?” Gamzee nodded, and headed out, giving Tavros a brief smile on the way out.

“Eridan, do you want to go first or do you want me to?”

“Uhh, I will.” Eridan sat up straight and cleared his throat. “Look, Taw, you were right. I’m not giwin’ back as much as I should, and honestly I’m not sure howw I could. I don’t wanna seem ungrateful, I mean, you sawed my life an’ I’m not even exaggeratin’ there! But bein’ your moirail probably isn’t the best way I can pay you back. I’m doin’ fine with Gam and Nep, but I don’t think I’m ready for a one-on-one quadrant right noww.”

“I totally understand.” Tavros nodded. “I’m glad you’re doing better, but uhh, I was going to say that maybe we’re not a good match… I’m so glad this is mutual, I was worried, if uhh, it wasn’t going to be.”
“Really?” Eridan gave him a little smile. “I didn’t want this to ruin a friendship. I mean we’ve all had so many problems. I just want us all to get along now.”

“Well, as long as we’re on the same page. I’m still here for you, but as a friend. If you need help with anything, especially that, I’m still here for you. We don’t have to be moirails to help each other, or talk about things.”

Eridan sniffled slightly, but didn’t cry. He looked at his hands, folded in his lap. “Kinda sucks anyway, though, huh? I sorta had high hopes.”

“Um, if it helps,” Tavros said, patting Eridan’s back, “I’ve always thought that, uhh, serendipity doesn’t only cover your one true quadrant set. Sometimes fate brings trolls together for just a short time, and that’s okay. See, you needed someone to help and I was the only one who knew how, and because of me, uhh, you’re happier and you’ll be better able to start something with whoever your proper moirail turns out to be.”

“That’s kind of a nice way to look at serendipity. it can be permanent or temporary dependin’ on your needs.” Eridan nodded, for no particular reason. “Still teachin’ me thin’s.”

“Friends teach friends things all the time.” Tavros smiled. “I’m sure you’ll make whoever your true moirail is really happy, Eridan. I’m just not that troll.”

“I know you’ll make your fated happy too, Taw. You’re a little soft for me, but I’m sure that will suit someone else just fine.”

“So,” Tavros, looked a bit nervous. “Can we just go our own ways and be alright? I don’t want this to become some big production with, uhh, both of us being negative for no good reason. Just come apart as friends?”

“Yeah.” Eridan sniffed again and pulled Tavros into a rough hug. “Huh, you have been good for me. This is my first completely nonviolent breakup.”

“Yeah, uhh, thanks for not, you know, shooting me.”

“Heh, I think Fef wears the scar better than you would. Thanks for not smacking me with a bucket.” Eridan’s brow furrowed. “Wwonder what happened to Pree… Ah, she’ll be fine. I guess I shouldn’t worry about her.”

“This is just friendly advice,” Tavros nodded. “I’m sure she’s okay. I mean, she doesn’t have much to worry about. She’s still with the fleet, and unless she tried to ditch she should have no, uhh, problems. I mean it though, thanks for being so, uhh, understanding.”

“You’re right, she could always take care of herself. So, friends then. Who would have thought? After all my years a thinkin’ about killin’ landdwellers, here I am thankin’ one and happily bein’ amiable. You were good for me, Taw. I’ll giwe you raw reviews to your next prospect.”

The door didn’t quite block out the sound of Gamzee’s voice. “Awww!”

Eridan shook his head and yelled “Nep!” He groaned as the eavesdropper fled, shoes pattering on the corridor’s metal floor. “Nice to know he’s botherin’ me in less dangerous ways, anyway.” Then Eridan gave a little smile. “Not that I really want to think about it, but he obviously cares a lot about you.”

Tavros nodded a little. “I was closest to him, me and Karkat. But he’s always been trying to get close
to everyone else.” Tavros smiled. “Plus, don’t, uhh, pin this all on me. I think he’s starting to hate you a lot less. Nepeta and you have been really good for him… I’ll give you a good review too, even if you’re not my, uhh, type or style for a moirail. You’ll be great for someone.”

Eridan nodded with a slight smile. “I hope so. I meant it, Taw, you were really great for me. I can’t thank you enough for your help. I feel a lot less like a freak of nature, and a lot more like a troll. Thank you.” Eridan arched his brow. “I didn’t mean our thin’ is bad, just before I felt like I was a doomed freak.”

“Eridan, despite the fact were, uhh, breaking up. I still get what you’re trying to say. You didn’t have knowledge and I, uhh, helped you get it.” Tavros smiled. “You’re welcome, and I’m always here to talk to you about that. Still friends with an understanding, just not romantic. I think we can both be mature about this, and so can every other troll on the ship.”

“Yeah,” Eridan nodded and smiled. “Well, should we see about findin’ out what was scraped together for dinner? If anythin’ was?”

Tavros nodded. “Yeah, there might be a some stuff still left. And, uhh, hopefully we’ll get to this planet soon.”

“If not, we all had a good run. How many trolls can say they managed to get this far away from the Empire?” They shared a smile, and Eridan looked down at his hands. “Uh, just for old time’s sake…”

“Okay, but, I’m going to use the confidence you helped me get, and make one request about it.”

“What?”

“Take your rings off. The jewels are kind of sharp.”

“Oh! Heh, sorry.” Eridan took off his rings, and he and Tavros exchanged a gentle teary-eyed fistbump.

“Um, one thing…” Tavros decaptchalogueled something and put it in Eridan’s hand. It was a hunting knife; it looked like it had been repaired and resharpened a few times, but it was still perfectly serviceable. “Tsukey gave me this, before she, uhh, left. She used to collect knives, and she taught me a few tricks with them. I’ve got another one. I didn’t want to lose this one, but, uhh, I think you need a close-combat weapon, in case you can’t use your gun, and I trust you to look after it.”

Eridan wiped his eye. “Thanks, Taw. I’ll do you and her proud with it.”

~*~

Everyone in the flight deck fell silent on hearing the murmured words “… Oh crud.”

“Uh, Equius? You’re getting dangerously close to swearing, which means something has happened which would have the rest of us screaming and running.” Nepeta slunk up to him as he stood over the screen, staring at the complicated mess of numbers.

“No, no, it’s nothing we can’t fix, I promise…”

The ship shuddered violently, and there was a crash as something fell off a shelf somewhere.

“Sollux, what the hell are you doing?”
“It’th not me!”

“Then-” Karkat was cut off by another alarm going off and the lights turning off throughout the ship. A moment later, all of them were colored by the bright red of the warning lights. “Can you fix that?” Karkat shouted over the alarm. Equius was quickly looking over the numbers, joined by Sollux and Vriska faster than anyone could blink.

“I told you thith clunker couldn’t make it thith far.”

“It was doing fine! We must have hit something.”

“We could be under attack.” The conversation came between alarm rings, mostly lost to the other trolls holding on to walls, or each other as the ship gave another shake.

“From what? I thought you said this planet doesn’t have any decent space travel or defenses!”

“They might have upgraded since that report was made, I don’t know!”

“We didn’t hit anything from their junk-belt, so it’s probably safe to guess we’re not being attacked,” Vriska growled at the monitor and screens. “Can we make it into their atmosphere?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. If I don’t know what ith wrong, I don’t know if we can navigate through it.”

“Equius, figure out what’s wrong. Now.”

“I’m trying! In the meantime, Serket, help Captor steer, and everyone else hold onto something… Preferably not me, Ampora.”

“Got it, everyone hold on or attempt to buckle up.” Vriska grabbed on to the control console, trying to get a handle on the ship. “Fuck, can you plug yourself in Sollux?”

“Hopefully, I have to get uth to deacthelerate too. If we hit their atmothphere, or anything going this fath, we’ll dethimate the land.” Sollux moved with the ship’s shaking over to his rig. “You focuth on keeping uth ath thtable ath pothible. Okay, VK?”

“Got it.”

Quickly every troll on deck found their seats and buckled in, though the ship was starting to shake terribly, worse than their takeoff. Equius quickly looked over the console read-out as Vriska took the controls in full. Sollux once again strapped into their makeshift rig. The ship shuddered violently.

“We need to go about three degrees starboard. We should be able to clip the atmosphere then, hopefully their gravity will catch us.” Sollux gave no affirmation, but judging by the way the ship moved and Vriska said nothing for a period it seemed as if her request has been heeded. “Alright, we should be lined up, and - shit. Fuck, their satellite. Sollux! We need to maneuver around it or that thing will fling us to the planet somehow faster or away from it.”

“Give me thome fucking directions, VK. I’m blind here.”

“I-I…” Vriska looked towards the console then towards the planet. “I don’t know. If we get too off this course we’re going to not hit the atmosphere enough to be pulled in. But that moon is in the goddamn way.”

“I’m no navigator, but perhaps we can move around it then back to position?” Equius offered.

“Thure, if you want to kill me, it’th done. The gravity already is enough to be a problem.”
“Okay, scratch that plan. Then what?”

“We can hope we avoid the— Eridan!”

“Mowe,” Eridan said, holding onto the buttons from around Vriska’s shoulders. “I’ll get us on ground, you act as my second set of eyes. Equ, you go be with Nep. We can’t fix this clunker, no time or obvious errors. So we just have to make it work.” The ship rattled once more as Equius unbuckled himself and moved from the second seat. Vriska ducked under Eridan’s arm and climbed to the other seat as another rattle knocked her chin against the armrest.

A thud behind them told them Equius had hit the ground.

“Equius, grab my hand, but be gentle,” Tavros piped up. “I’ll act as your balance as you get up. Everyone, help him get to Nepeta.” There were no words but Vriska could see the nods from the others. “Alright, Vriska, Eridan, Sollux. Do your best.”

“That Agorer training better have done something, ED.”

“It did, Sol. Alright, I’m goin’ to try not to kill you.”

“Thankth, you’re too kind.”

“Wris, watch for incomings, and double check my measures.”

“Got it.”

There was silence as Eridan maneuvered the controls and took full stock of the situation. It seemed like hours, and as if his order would be too late, though everyone’s perception of time was off, because it certainly didn’t take Equius hours to buckle back into his seat with Nepeta.

“This will have to be perfectly timed, Sol, when I say go you better move it as best and fast as you can. Compensate where you know you need to. We’ll use the moon’s gravity against it, and pull ourselves in.”

“We’ll be going too fast,” Vriska said, looking out the window. “That impact could be fatal.”

“Could be, not is.”

“Okay, it will be fatal, we’ll hit the ground and this thing will either A: explode, B: be crushed, C: break up upon entry.”

“It’s a risk we have to take, there is no other real way. These coordinates were off, we have to compensate where we can.”

“Yes, but I still don’t want to die. I have a better plan, let’s just avoid the planet and hit the star. It’s a faster death.”

“Stop bein’ such a drama queen, Wris.”

“I’m not, your plan is shitty.”

“Both of you just get the fuck up. I’ll do it. If we don’t, we die, tho what? I’m going to take the two pertinent channel of survival through the zero. Tell me when, ED.”

“Remember when I said to say your last goodbyes in the junk belt? Yeah, this time I mean it, we’re all being recycled.”
“Everyone but Gamz, he’s got a paradise to look forward too. No stupid word on him to hold him back if we whoop.”

“Terezi, seriously,” Vriska said, looking back at the other passengers. “Why are you joking now? Now of all the goddamn times.”

“I’m not, I’m serious. Our fates decided. His isn’t. He’s on to his next great adventure. So, we whoop.”

“You whoop loud enough sister, I’m sure the spirits all take you all in and we can kick ass beyond the motherfucking road.”

“I can’t believe this is happening, did you get everyone into your super stupid cult?”

“Vriska,” Karkat said, his voice surprisingly level, “is going to die still thinking she’s the best and everything is stupid. I’m going to die shouting. Sollux is going to die, believing that somehow he can save us from doom. Eridan dying by flying towards fiery death. Equius and Nepeta being together. Aradia dying generally being okay with everything. Feferi holding out hope that we’ll pull through. Gamzee dying mumbling to himself. Tavros ready to assist all of us if he does survive, Kanaya looking stoic facing her death with stupid grace. Terezi dying making a joke. Yeah, we’re all going to die as we lived. Fantastic.”

“Whoop it up then. Who is with me? Gamz?”

“Too busy saying all your last rites. Whoop away though, lends energy to the rites.”

“Awesome, we get last rites.”

“Would all of you shut up? Religion is stupid.”

“I said a prayer beforehand that we live, but on the off chance we don’t I’m saying the last rites. I said the same phrasing to the spirits. They all up and understand.”

“Great, so if we survive, I’ll convert…. for an hour, and whoop it up on the planet soil. I’ll even guzzle down a Faygo. And get down with the clown.”

“Spidersis, I don’t think you could handle getting down with the clown.”

“If we survive it has nothin’ to do with fakey fake religion or magics. Just my superior flyin’ skills.”

“Are we REELY all going to die arguing?”

“The Heiress is right, we should prepare for the worst, but be together as a team, not separated as we are.”

“Are you kidding?” Vriska said with a laugh. “This is the most civil this stupid tugship has been since it blasted off Alternia. I’m kind of enjoying it. And I doubt your flying skills are any better than mine, Eridan. I have practical experience, what have you got?”

“I had the best Agorer mentor in the Alternian fleet, he’s seen more battles and ships than any troll out there. Except for maybe a few of the Generals of each branch and the High General himself. So guess what? Experience means shit right now, next to actual practical knowledge.”

“I beg to differ.”
“You know what, fine. If we live it’s because Gamzee said a couple words to his imaginary friends. If we live we all have to whoop it up and drink a Faygo. Then all get down with this clown.”

“This clown don’t know if he would all like it too motherfucking much if everyone all got down with him at one time, but he’s willing to motherfucking try.”

“Hi—Makara, there is no need to be lewd right now of all times!”

“Sol, swing us to the portside.”

“Got it, ED, and I’m not getting down with any clown. Not that one, or anyone that want to stand in ath thighstitute.”

The ship trembled and with a crunch moved back on path. The groan from Sollux was not lost among the sounds from the ship; he was now nearly panting from the force required to move the ship. There was a moment of silence before a loud crack and thud rang around the cabin, and another alarm went off that Vriska quickly shut off.

“We’ve lost one of the wings,” she said steadily to Eridan. “If you do want to try approach going this fast you’ll have to slide it to the other side so we don’t spin out and drill into the ground. I think it might have been knocked loose and the wires just detached. That was the alarm. Now, it’s gone.”

“What are you saying? I’m going to circle this ship until we find water and crash into that.”

“Fucking seadweller!” Vriska lunged forward, trying to grab the controls. Eridan cracked a smile.

“No, I was kiddin’, Wris. I’m going to circle as much as we can though. But there is a fuckin’ huge ocean in front of us, look.” The sphere in front of them was mostly blue with the occasional white wisp of clouds. As far as any of them could see there wasn’t any land in sight.

“Wonderful, and entire planet made up of ocean—Wait, wait, on the starboard side. That’s brown… green, land. Land on the starboard side. Land-Ho!”

“Once we enter into the atmosphere I’m going to try to float us to slower and then when it looks like we’re running out of land I’ll point us toward the ground. If we can maintain the altitude.”

“Thought like a plan, ED, just get us into position.” Sollux gritted his teeth, cutting off his words briefly, “position.” When he spoke again his words were shaky, harder to understand.

“Don’t kill yourself, Sol. Take it slow, the last thing we need is you dying.”

“I don’t hear my own voice, I assume I would.”

“Can you hear any of ours?” Vriska asked. Sollux looked towards her as best he could and said nothing. “That’s reassuring.”

“It’ll work, Wris. It’ll work. It has to work.”

“It doesn’t have to do anything,” Vriska said softly, though the flight deck was quiet enough all of them could hear it. “If our time is up our time is up.”

There was deep silence around the ship as the sphere in front of them grew larger and larger by the second, broken by the rattles and groans from the tug ship, and Gamzee’s mumbled rites. Every troll
would have held their breath if there was a point to doing so. If they were going to die, they were all going to do it breathing.

“Sol?”

“Thill conthiouth.”

“Good. Speed?”

“Thlower than the thepeed of light. But not thlow enough. How long until we hit the atmothphere?”

“Soon. You’ll know,” Vriska said slowly, her hand unconsciously digging into the armrest on the chair. “Now’s the time for goodbyes.” Just as Vriska finished her sentence the ship rattled with terrible force, and a roar echoed around the flight deck.

Fire lighting up the deck with a too bright light none of them had seen in ages. Every troll, minus Eridan and Sollux, looked at the fellow trolls around the deck. All of them silently, and mentally taking stock of this moment, sure it was going to be their last.

The fire slowly faded, and they all could see mostly lit ocean below them. The ship was still creaking, popping, groaning, and shaking. But it was far more quiet now. Eridan was holding the controls with white knuckles. Vriska looked back towards the ocean. All of them were poised and ready for the crash landing.

“So far so good!” Terezi broken the silence. “Whoop whoop!”

“Whoop whoop,” Aradia replied.

“Come on, brothers and sister. You got this motherfucker! Whoop whoop!”

“If we live, someone kill me,” Vriska muttered. “I don’t know if I can stand to be on a strange planet with a bunch of circus freaks.”

“Really?”

“Fuck off, Eridan, not really. This is just obnoxious.”

“No land yet, and we’re slowing down. Hopefully the drag continues.”

“Yeah, slightly slower than the speed of light. I don’t think this planet has enough mass to slow us down enough.”

“Don’t you both thtart arguing again. We got thith. Jutht keep me informed.”

“Got it, Sol. Tell me if you see land, Wris.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll tell you.”

The ship was mostly quiet again, it wasn’t a long stretch of time, but everything seemed terribly slow to the inhabitants of Naelenureenna. Vriska stared intently out the window, before she suddenly perked up and a fraction of a second later so did Eridan.

“Land ho! Still too fast, that ocean wasn’t that big.”

“Well, it’s not about size, it’s about howw it’s used —”
“Eridan!” Feferi shouted.

“Wwell, it’s a good way to remember even the choppiest landin’ can wwork on the shortest runway. Sol, can you sloww us dowwn anymoe?” Sollux said nothing, but the sudden push back on all their chairs seemed to indicate that he could. “Don’t do too much, you’ll drain yourself. Also, wwe’re sunside. so everyone be careful if wwe do make it.”

“Great, if we survive the shittiest landing ever, then we can all roast to death on the planets surface. Awesome.” Karkat rolled his eyes. “I guess I should be grateful, but fuck that.”

The ship crested land, and Vriska unbuckled herself, standing up but clutching onto the console to keep herself steady. “Looks like it’s not barren, but still barren. There’s sentient life, but it looks like desert. Wait, oh shit. Mountains.” The ship jumped up, along with all of the troll’s stomachs, with a hiss from Sollux. “We didn’t need to go up that much. But we are definitely avoiding the mountains. Less barren, now more. Shit. This planet is dumb, can’t it just pick a stupid fucking climate? I mean really.”

“Wwell, Wris, wwe’ll hawe to do the best wwe can.”

“It’s getting green again, and still sunny too. Fuck. Fuck.”

“You’re suddenly on the team that wwe’re goin’ to surwiwe?”

“Whoop whoop!” Terezi shouted. Quickly followed by Aradia and Gamzee’s reply “Whoop-we-got-this-whoop!”

“Shut your stupid mouth up, Terezi.”

“No.”

“Argh, fine, whoop like an idiot. We’re still not out of the woods yet.”

“That’s funny because there are wwhat looks like forest beloww us… Shit.”

“Shit, what?” Karkat said jerking forward in his restraints to try to see.

“Coast. Wwith a lot more ocean. As fine as that wwould be for Fef and I… Sollux, help me turn us north.”

“Got it.” The ship spun fast enough that Vriska almost flew from where she was standing, and the other trolls could feel their bruises already forming from their restraints. Éridan hissed then growled at Sollux. “Thut up. I’m thtill new to thith too.”

“Wwe’re going to go dowwn here. Start the descent.”

“Still too—” Vriska said, sitting down once more and buckling herself in.

“I don’t care, Wris, do as I say.”

“Fine, starting descent.” The ship lowered in altitude, still groaning, now creating a terrible whistling noise, every bloodpusher on deck throbbing from how fast they were beating, heaviness in all their limbs as ears popped and their bodies were forced against the side of their seats. “It’s been great, guys. Maybe next time.” They all could barely hear what Vriska said, but still the words registered.

“If this is the end, it’s been awesome. Terrible mostly, but awesome too,” Terezi said. “Next adventure, coming right up. Whoop whoop!”
“Brace for impact!” Eridan said loudly and quickly, clutching onto the controls.

“Whoop whoop!” Terezi and Aradia were now in time.

The young trolls caught eyes with each other as the ship began to spin to one side, and Eridan tried to correct it. They could see green outside the window. Now, they all held their breath. There might have been a collective swallow, before Eridan spoke.

“Impact in 3… 2…”

The ship groaned, snapped and crunched as it slammed into the ground, strongly enough to tear the restraints on their belts, jolting them forward or to the side. The ship shuddered before it felt like it was in freefall. The lights blinked off, then on, then off again. The ship sparked, and with a final crunch landed on the ground. Inside the ship all was still.

~~~~~

Paga n. a unit of measurement. The largest unit of land based measurement. Equal to 24 nadou. (294 m | 966ft)
Chapter 27

It would have been nearly pitch black if not for the occasional spark from now-exposed wires. An arc crossed the air, filling it with static. A squeak was the first thing Tavros heard, the remains of the portside wall partially compacted around him. The metal tore with a hiss and he was left looking at his lusus, who nearly flew into his face, squeaking and chirping in worry.

“Hey, Tinkerbull. Hey. I’m okay. At least I, uhh, think so.” His lusus paid no heed to his words, nuzzling against his cheek before crawling along him and pressing his head to where the little lusus could reach to check for injuries. “No, it’s okay, at least right now, we have to find if anyone else made it.”

As Tinkerbull pulled at the restraints, Tavros had a moment to listen to the sparking and groaning ship. He had no idea how he survived that crash, and he could only hope he wasn’t the only one who made it. There was a good chance that others did, if Tavros survived so could they.

There was a groan, and not one from the ship, this sounded a bit more trollish and slightly like Vriska. “What the fuck?” Tavros nearly burst out into tears, two of them had made it, and that meant more of the odds were in their favor. “How the fuck did I survive that? Kanaya? Tavros? Aradia? Terezi?… Eridan? Fuck, anyone?”

“I’m here, Vriska,” Tavros said as loud as he could. “Just sort of stuck in the, uhh, rubble.”

“Great, and I’m going to have to help get you out of there. Wonderful.”

“No, uh, Tinkerbull is helping. He, uh, made it too.” Tavros could almost feel the eyeroll, and was nearly beaming from his smile.

“Awesome, I now have double the useless crew… Shit, Sollux?” Tavros didn’t miss the up-pitch in her voice and the shifting of rubble. The same idea hit him a moment after. Sollux hadn’t been strapped in, not like everyone else. He had some restraints because of the rig, but nothing like the belts they had in place. Adrenaline upping its distribution through him, Tavros inched his hands forward, trying to help Tinkerbull get the metal out of the way.

“Tavros, Vriska? Could one of you perchance assist me when you escape your own trappings? I’m afraid both myself and Aradia are trapped, and she is at the moment unresponsive, though I do think I feel her breathing. My arm seems to be stuck under something that feels like a branch. It’s not crushed, just trapped.”

“Alright, Kanaya, once I get out — Tinkerbull, where are you going?” The lusus didn’t even squeak in reply, instead he flew off towards the sound of Kanaya’s voice. Another hiss later and Tavros could hear the wood snap.

“Ah, thank you, Tinkerbull. Shall I assist you with freeing Tavros?” Kanaya must have shifted at Tinkerbull’s squeak because a moment later his lusus was pulling at his restraints once more. “Oh… Oh my.. One thing at a time. Vriska—”

“Still conscious, get Tavros out, find all the bodies,” Vriska’s words were coarse, short and bleak. Tavros could feel his heart fall. Who had she found, which one of them hadn’t made it? The metal that closed him in rattled as Kanaya tried to move it. Tinkerbull snapped through the restraints, and Tavros could lean his weight into helping Kanaya pull open the metal and give him enough room to pull out of twisted wreckage. Tavros blinked rapidly a few times to adjust his eyes before taking in
the scene.

The floor of the ship looked scorched, though there was no trace of fire; he followed the black lines back to where Sollux’s rig had been. Now it was in pieces, there were a few traces of yellow blood, but no sign of Sollux. The wall beside him warped and mostly gone. Tavros turned looking at the rest of the ship. The bottom of the ship had been torn through with what looked like a tree. Apparently they didn’t hit the ground but landed on or in a tree.

Through the branches, Tavros could see Vriska looking over at it and around, trying to avoid the new holes where sunlight streamed in. She was bleeding from the forehead, her steps a little shaky, and Tavros could tell she was having a hard time breathing. Her ribs were broken or cracked.

Kanaya pulled out Aradia from where they had been sitting; a branch impaled just a few inches from them and the seatbelt lay crushed. Next to them had been Equius and Nepeta. That’s where Tavros would start. He moved as fast as he could to the other seat, the remains of the branch blocking his view.

Nepeta and Equius were both there, and looked relatively in one piece, if it weren’t for the bit of blue blood dripping onto the floor Tavros would have been elated. Instead he quickly moved to them. Part of the branch lay over their legs, locking them in. Tavros had never wished so hard that the blueblood would be awake and alive and could just poke the branch into sawdust.

“Nepeta? Equius? Nepeta?” Tavros put a hand on her cheek, his thumb under her nose, trying to find out if she was breathing. There was warm air, so far so good. “Nepeta, you need to wake up. Come on. Equius is bleeding.”

Tavros tried pulling on the branch, only to make more blood fall to the ground. He could feel himself beginning to panic, what was he supposed to do now? It was selfish, almost, for him to think that if Equius died, they would have lost the only member of their team with any real medical training. Even if it was primarily in robotics.

“I have the cubes,” Nepeta mumbled, her eyes slowly forcing themselves open, awake. “I have the sugar cubes.”

“That’s great, Nepeta, could the cubes help us, get this branch off your legs?” Nepeta stared at him, looking lost, and Tavros could feel himself want to wring his hands or bite his lip. Nepeta had a concussion. They could handle a concussion on their own, right?

“For tea.” The words were a broken battle cry that sort of turned into one word, sounding more like “forty”, as Nepeta tried to stand up. “Damn.”

“Yeah, there is this, uhh, branch, seat belt you have, but we have to be careful. You could be bleeding.”

“Bleeding?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. That’s bad… I’m bleeding.”

“Nepeta!” Tavros said, panic creeping into his voice.

“Wait, I’m not.”

“Tavros,” Vriska nearly growled. “Stop chatting, start recovering, we have to assess our assets and
get moving. No doubt the ship crash-landing drew attention. The creatures on this planet could be hostile, in case you missed it, it’s the middle of the goddamn day. We have to save who we can, we can’t lose everyone.”

“Have you found Sollux?”

“Only pieces of him.”

“W-what?” Nepeta said, suddenly more coherent. “S-Sollux, Sir Spittle?” Nepeta began to struggle against the branch. “Oh, oh god. Equius? Equius!” Nepeta had caught sight of the blood. “No, no, no, fuck this god damn branch!” In a moment her claws were out and sliced clean through it. “Equius. Equius.” He had put her index finger against the blue-blood’s neck, and now she was pressing hard to try to find a heartbeat. “Okay, okay. He’s alive. But he’s bleeding. Oh god, and Sollux…” Tavros could sense her tears.

“I’ll help you move Equius, I’ll look at the wound too, see what we can do. One thing at a time.” Tavros took a breath. Nepeta looked at him, and after a moment nodded. Both of them fumbled with the larger troll, laying him down on the floor. The bigger branch had a smaller protrusion that looked like it stabbed into his leg.

Tavros ripped at the hem of his shirt, pulling off a large enough strip he could use it as a shitty tourniquet; really it was all they could do right now, and it would stop him from bleeding too much more. As soon as Nepeta was sure Equius was alive and would be okay, she moved quickly towards Vriska.

“Where?” Tavros could hear Nepeta’s tears already.

“I’ve got his glasses and a shoe. I can’t find him. Or Eridan, he should have been next to me, but… he wasn’t, the belt’s ripped and the glass from the window is broken.”

“We’ll find them, Vriska..” Tavros was trying to maneuver around the tree that separated both sides of the flight deck. Terezi was busy chewing on her own restraints, teal blood rolling down from her nose. He was watching Feferi’s eyes flutter. Tavros wanted to breathe a sigh of relief; that was a few more.

“Tavros?” he heard Feferi mumble, as he eyes tried to focus. “Are we alive?”

“Some of us, so far. It’s, uh, day though. So we need to get everyone out and get moving to somewhere that doesn’t smell like blood, is dark, and that we can defend. Are both of you okay?”

“Yeah, nose stopped up with blood, but so far so good,” Terezi said quickly and went back to chewing, the fibers slowly uncoiling.

“I think I’m going to have a black eye, and my ribs hurt, but other than that I feel okay.” Feferi said softly afterwards. “Once we get out, help get everyone together?” Tavros nodded and didn’t look forward to what they’d have to say to both Feferi and Aradia if they couldn’t find Sollux. Or Eridan. Or if one of them was lost forever. Fear crept into Tavros’ heart with a security blanket of sadness. Maybe they had just become friends again, only to lose each other.

Tavros reached his hands forward, avoiding Terezi’s bite and yanked on the belt, assisting her in pulling it off. Another cascade of sparks lit up the partially bright ship. There was a screeching tear through metal and the sounds of ripping. Then a noise that sounded wrong, but it was obviously made by a troll. The belt in Tavros’s hand remained frayed, and Tavros looked towards the only other seat left to check.
Oh no.

“Karkat?” He heard Gamzee’s voice, it was shaking, terribly, horribly. “Karkat? Karkat. Karkat… No… Karkat.”

Tavros could feel his heart shatter, and Terezi pushed him out of the way. The seat belt tore and he scrambling over toward Gamzee as fast as possible. “Karkat?” Her voice was too soft, too empty.

“He’s-He’s bleeding, I-I…” Tavros moved forward quickly followed by Feferi. He could see Gamzee was crying, The purple-blooded troll was bleeding too, but Karkat looked unresponsive, paler than he should have been, and bright red covered the front of his shirt. He seemed to be bleeding from the nose and mouth. “Karkat, no, you can’t go.” Gamzee was clutching the smaller troll tightly, Tavros couldn’t really see the shirt flutter and fall with breaths, and Tavros could feel his own tears forming.

“No, Karkat, we need our leader…” Terezi was whispering, putting her hands on Karkat’s shoulders trying to hold him as well. “Karkat.” He could hear Terezi starting to cry. Her fingers were desperately searching his neck for a pulse. Tavros bit his lip, moving forward to the group, Feferi and Kanaya following him. He couldn’t hear Vriska anymore, he hoped she hadn’t just decided to move on. They might need her to help fight against a mourning Gamzee or Terezi.

Nepeta was sobbing as she appeared on the other side, holding one of Sollux’s shoes like it was a life line. Eridan, Sollux, Karkat, maybe Equius… Maybe even Aradia. They couldn’t all be gone, they couldn’t. He crawled forward, wishing for what he hoped could be another story. Grabbing Karkat by the shoulders and wrenching the smaller troll from his two quadrantmates. He shoved his lips against Karkat’s own, the flesh cold, the blood warm beneath his lips. But this is what worked in his fairy tales. There was a magical kiss, and bam, back to life. He’d gladly kiss all of them if it meant they would all survive. He held Karkat there for a long moment, he felt the smaller trolls breath hitch against his lip. He could feel everyone staring at him.

Karkat’s eyes tried to blink, and he realized someone was kissing him. Someone warm and crying. He raised his hands and pushed the offending troll off of him.

“What the fuck, Tavros!” he yelled, his ribs aching, but totally worth it. “Why the fuck were you kissing me, are you that pandead and backwards?”

“Karkat!” Terezi and Gamzee both yelled and grabbed the smaller troll by the shoulders, both of them holding him close, leaving Tavros to blush like an idiot looking at the other trolls.

“Ow, ow, ow, stop fucking hugging me!” Karkat was shouting and Tavros could feel the smile appear on his face, disregarding his earlier tears. Kanaya put her hand on Tavros’ shoulder. He could feel her sigh of relief.

“We thought you were dead!” Terezi said. “This is just us covering you in sweet pity.”

“Well, pity hurts, fucking stop it. Who’s all here?”

“Uhh, me, Vriska, Kanaya, Feferi, Terezi, Gamzee, you, Nepeta… Equius is unconscious. I think he hit his head pretty hard judging by the hole behind where his head would have been… He’s hurt too, Aradia’s also unconscious. We can’t find Sollux, or Eridan…”

“There’s a lot of blood…” Nepeta said slowly. “So much blood.”

Karkat pushed off the two trolls clinging to him, moving to stand up; he was shaky, but alive. He spat out the additional blood from his mouth, a sharp inhale later he spoke. “We’ll find their bodies at
the least. Gather Equius, and Aradia, get ready to move them out… or down. Did we land in a tree? Fuck it, I don’t care. Get ready to move on.” Karkat had his sickles out a moment later, following the burnt pattern on the floor.

Tavros helped Nepeta with Equius, trying to drag him along before Gamzee just pushed them away and hoisted up the blueblood, holding him on his back. Gamzee grimaced, but still held him steady. Feferi helped Kanaya lift up Aradia. She pulled out her trident, and they too moved towards the burnt pattern’s end and the blown out part of the ship right behind it. Vriska was standing there talking to Karkat.

“No signs of life yet, but our landing had to draw attention. I’m surprised there wasn’t more devastation in the area around. Maybe Eridan did learn something from his training, but still we hit the ground going 3284 paga per hour… I can’t find him either. The windows blown out and there is violet blood, but it looks like he might have flown out pretty far. I didn’t want to venture off too far. Not until everyone was out.”

“You want to find Eridan or Sollux’s bodies?” Karkat said trying to keep his voice steady.

“I’ll go after Eridan. I mean, it’s not exactly right for me to bring Sollux’s corpse back. Eridan is basically quadrantless, as his ex it’s the least I can do. I mean, Nepeta should be with Equius, and Gamzee’s not exactly fit for a long trek.”

“Oh alright.” Karkat nodded and Vriska turned and began to walk slowly, staying in the shade of the trees. I’ll find Sollux, the rest of you. Get our inventory or treat the wounded or your own injuries… Nepeta, my order is you stay with Equius.”

“Karkat, I can go find Sollux,” Feferi said slowly. Karkat shook his head.

“They need your strength right now, and your fighting skill, you stay, I’ll find Sollux…”

“If you found me, KK, are you going to kith me too?” They quickly turned to look over at the troll who joined them. Sollux was bleeding out of his eyes and nose and mouth, limping a step forward before he clutched onto a tree. Doubling over in pain.

“Sollux!” Too many trolls said his name all at once.

“Fuck you, Captor! Fuck you and your stupid face,” Karkat said.

“Eheheh, well at leath I’m alive, it’th good most of you are too.”

“Are you hurt? I mean more hurt than we see.”

“I have a wicked headache, and I think I melted myself through the thide of the thip. The crash didn’t throw me far. But I am bleeding quite a bit. It thould calm down pretty thoon. Tho far too much adrenaline to feel much. I’m thure we all are the thame.”

Feferi rushed over to the psionic troll and helped him move towards the group. The yellowblood was limping, but he was right, at least he was alive. He sat down resting against the outside of the ship, where metal had twisted and created some odd type of awning. He looked pretty battered, before Feferi started to help him with wiping off the blood.

“Just Eridan then?” Kanaya said slowly. Karkat nodded, looking after the way Vriska went. “Hopefully he’s alive, that was quite brave of him to take the controls… I didn’t expect it from him.”

“Eridan..” Feferi said slowly, “isn’t a wimp, nor is he a coward. He’s just odd… I hope he’s okay…”
I mean, I hope all of us got out this crash alive.”

“FF, I’m thure ED will be fine… I did my best not to have thith crath be too bad. I’m thure he’ll be okay…”

“What did you do, Sollux?” Karkat asked slowly, rage butting into his voice.

“I thopped uth. I mean, we were going too fath. I thought, if I could thtop uth and thet uth down thoftly we’d all make it. I forgot the lawth of motion. Without rethtraintth I thlammed into the thip, I mutht have ben tho hot I melted through it. Which probably kicked off the remaining phionicth I had in me, to defend me againtht pain. Tho I thhot out of the thhip, and without me holding uth up the thhip fell on to the ground. Thill, theemth it worked.”

“You’re the biggest idiot I’ve ever met. You could have killed yourself, and then where would we be? Goddamn it Sollux, you need to stop with these hero antics. They don’t fit you, you can’t keep doing shit like this. I swear to every fuckin-”

“KK, don’t bitch, tho far eleven out of twelve ith a pretty good thurvival ratio. If we would have hit the ground, we could have all died. Lothing me would have been a thmall thacrifithe.”

Feferi wrapped her arms around Sollux. “I agree with Karkat, you can’t just throw your life away. We need you, we need all of us.”

“Well, hopefully we do have all of uth. That’th if ED thhowth up. But I’m thure he’s juth fathionably late ath uthual.” Sollux rolled his eyes. “Everything hath to look up, FF, I mean… We can’t have all the thitty luck, and I think GZ ran out of thitty luck about a perigee ago. Tho, all good.”

Nepeta marched over to Sollux, Equius not far from the group. “I would slap you, but it might kill you.”

“One of your thlapth? Hardly. It might tickle a bit.”

“You’re tho annoying!”

“Tho are you. Don’t you have little nut creatureth to pounthe? Make yourself utheful, NP.” Sollux gave Nepeta a little smile, she returned it before she scowled and went back to Equius. “Tho, onthe we find out the verdict about ED, then what?”

“We have to stay in the shade, luckily this forest is dense. But it’s going to be hard to move and find somewhere to hide. Maybe we’re isolated enough we don’t have to worry about being attacked by the native species. Either way, get injuries treated, gather up our remaining supplies, then find food and water. Figure out if we can even leave the planet with the twisted hunk of metal that was Mindscar.”

“I don’t know, I’m not that kind of engineer. I could fix the wiring, I’m pothitive. The thhell ith thill there. Okay, we thhould thtart injury checkth. Now grope each other.”

“What?” Karkat said. “Assume this happened, do you just want to grope me, Captor?”

“Eheheh, yeth, KK, you’ve found out my planth. Whatever will I do?”

“If you want to grope me that badly, you could have just asked. But then I’m going to let Terezi grope Aradia.”

“Theemth fair, and kind of oddly thexy… Fuck you, KK, fuck you for these mental imageth. Fuck
you for everything.”

“Woah there, that’s moving a little fast don’t you think.” Karkat smirked

“So what was it like kithing TV? You trying to make out with all of uth?”

“I will skin you alive.”

The leaves and underbrush rustled, in a flash all of them had their weapons, ready to defend their ship; a sorry excuse for a shelter, but it was theirs. Tension dug into their muscles, before Karkat took a step forward. Gamzee’s arm shot out, a small knife in the other hand, he crept forward, hardly disturbing the underbrush as he approached the bushes. The rustling and crunch grew closer, not sounding like approaching footsteps they might recognize. They all watched, ready to fight off the animal or alien that might be encroaching.

“All of you don’t attack me. I’m lugging a sopping wet Eridan.” Vriska’s voice echoed around the woods. All of them had their weapons put away in a moment, relaxing a little without the obvious threat.

“I can wwalk, Wris.”

“Like hell you can, you were stumbling all over the place.”

“Well, when you hit wwater at that speed, it’s like hittin’ the ground. I’m okay though.” Eridan added that last bit, quickly. “Obvously, I have a feww cuts. But it’s not too bad.”

“Can you believe this guy?” Vriska said coming through a gap in the trees so they all could see her. She was wet up to the waist, and Eridan was completely soaked. “Managed to land in a lake. The oooookkly lake for paga probably. Lucky fucking fish.”

“Look on the bright side,” Eridan groaned, rubbing his head. “At least wwe knoww wwe have a source of drinking wwater if wwe’re stuck here.”

“Okay, if everyone’th alive I’m gonna go meth with the com,” Sollux said. “I hope it’th in one piethe. I thhould contact HC and thee how much of a headthtart we have…”

“HC?” Feferi asked, wrinkling her brow.

“Oh - Helmthman Chaton, in the battlethhip. AA tellth me hith probable dethendant wath named Laneen Chaton.”

“Only ‘probable’? If they had the same sigil wouldn’t they know for sure?”

“Yeah, I know that’th not hith name, but it’th ath good a name ath any. I don’t like jutht thinking of him ath ‘the Helmthman’, and I didn’t want to athk.” Feferi nodded, and patted Sollux’s hand.

Karkat started to pace up and down. “Okay, priorities. See what we can salvage from the ship, try and find something edible, don’t get eaten ourselves…”

“Our best bet is it’s shelter,” Nepeta said, her voice still not fully cleared of tears. “As of right now, we can’t really move on. The sun’s out, so let’s get back inside, grab supplies, get medical checks done, and then move on once night falls. Maybe there is a cave around.”

“I don’t really like the idea of staying on board the ship covered in blood,” Vriska sighed, “But I suppose it’s really all we have right now.” Vriska joined up with the group, taking off her overshir
before dropping it on Equius’ face. The sudden change to cold and wet made his body lurch up.

“Vriska!” Nepeta called at the other troll. “He could be seriously hurt.”

“Well, him staying passed out this long isn’t healthy. If he has a concussion we need to wake him up. Hope that there isn’t any brain swelling. Unless anyone has something we can stab in his skull to relieve the pressure.”

“I do have a terrible headache.” The voice under the cloth was a bit shaky. “But I don’t feel too disoriented.” The covering shirt was pulled off his face and tossed back at Vriska. Equius sat up slowly grimacing from pain, using his hand to brace him. “I might need some help. Perhaps I did hit my head too hard.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Vriska said, wringing out her shirt. “Aradia is knocked out as well, but dumping water on her might short her. Not that I’d mind putting her in pain, but I also don’t want to kill her.”

“If she hit her neck just right she might have gone partially into shut down,” Equius said. “It would take quite a bit of effort, but seeing as we all survived the crash… We all did, right?” Equius looked around again. “Is Captor—”

“Yeah, Sollux is fine, he’s trying to talk to a Helmsman. I think he’s been chatting with one on and off this whole flight. Apparently the one from the Battleship Condescension.”

“Well, that could either be really bad or really good. Well then, all of us made it. I see we are all injured as well.” Equius sighed. “Vriska, I may need your help for my own medical treatment. There are a few things I want to try before I shove something into my skull. Once I am a bit more able, then I will check everyone else out.”

Karkat nodded. “Okay, here’s what we do. Everyone get back aboard the ship. Those without terrible injuries, gather our remaining supplies. Those with, wait on the flight deck for Equius to treat you.” The trolls nodded. “Once all of us, even if you don’t think you’re hurt too much, are checked out, we’ll all load up on our supplies. Once night falls, we’ll head over to the lake Eridan and Vriska were at, gather water, and then start the process of hunting up something to eat. Fresh food and water will be half the team’s duty, the other half to acquire some type of shelter. We need to heal up.”

“Listen, I know you all shouldn’t be all trusting me a hundred percent on this. But if we stay close to Mindscar, we could watch if anything comes close. If it don’t we can take the tree outta it and fucking put it over it. Camouflage it. See if we can all motherfucking repair it. Plus it’s cover. I mean we can still all look, but see if we can use what we have.”

“You’re right, we are stupid to listen to you. How about beasts? I don’t really feel like being eaten.”

“Well, the only reason I say it is cause,“ Gamzee pointed towards a tree, “I think that’s a Arth nutcreature, and it’s motherfuckin’ tiny. Cute as shit too.” They all turned to look at the animal, about a fourth of the size of one of their own nutcreatures. Its tail twitched as it ran down a tree and on to the ground. “If this is being any indication of shit, I’d all say that their animals are a lot smaller than our own. Not to say there ain’t gonna be nothing big, but if this were Alternia, they’d be here already.”

All of them were looking at the creature suspiciously. “That isn’t enough to even feed Nepeta,” Karkat sighed. “We might have to spend hours hunting if everything is so small. And I think maybe we should think over the proposition. Keep our distance, but watch. Gamzee does bring up a good point, and if there are no caves around… not all of us can hide in the lake.”
“Point taken,” Vriska said.

“Also…” Gamzee had a little smile on his face. “Shit been hard, but I’ve been keeping this for such a fucking occasion. I was pretty sure everyone but Sollux agreed.” With a little wave of his hand, he held a double bottle of Faygo. “You all got a lot of thanking to be doin’ at Terezi and Aradia.”

“Oh fuck you,” Vriska said.

“Shit no, celebration elixir. We all survived a crash landing on an alien planet while we outrun the empire. Gotta say there is being plenty to celebrate. Plus also, we should drain the bottles and fill them up with water, if we got to be doing any fuckin’ hiking.”

“Stop it, just stop it, you’re supposed to be a thick skulled idiot.” Vriska snatched the bottle from Gamzee’s hand. “Fine, whoop or whatever.” She opened it up, looked at the bottle warily, before taking a drink. “God damn that shit’s disgusting. The aftertaste is like dipping your tongue in syrup.” She shuddered. “Maybe you should drain them.”

“All but Sollux said they’d get down with the clown.” Gamzee smiled, and it took Vriska a moment to realize he was teasing. He walked over to Eridan and dropped the bottle in his lap. “Thanks for flying us to safety, fishbro. And thanks for thinking my spirits could be saving us. Though it was Sollux who did, they appreciate the sentiment.”

“I feel like I’ve been coerced into drinking shitty soda again.” Gamzee nodded. “Fine, it’s not too bad really, it’s just crappy.” Gamzee went through all of them, making them help him drain the bottle, and, in a very soft, hard-to-detect way, teasing all of them. It would have been annoying if each of them hadn’t found it encouraging that maybe he was going a bit back to his old self. All of them followed Karkat’s orders, each one of them patched up one wound at a time, Aradia needing some mechanical work before her robotic half would allow her still physical half to start up.

They all gathered what they could, waiting for the sky to darken, the sun to vanish and for all of them to get on the move. Nepeta called as the sky turned orange. The sun setting made all of them gather at the mouth of their escape hatch. Something hit all of them, a lingering feeling that none of them orated, but they all knew. They were stuck here, this was where Feferi’s battle would be. This planet was either going to be the start of a new Alternia, or all of their graves. It didn’t frighten them, it didn’t bother them, instead they took it as it was. A message, plus another one from Sollux, meant they had time, they had time to heal up, get better, and practice before the fleet showed up.

The sun was completely behind the horizon, a small band of light projected in the distance, before any of them moved. All of them were disregarding a lot of torrid past to help each other. They just survived a crash. They goaded each other to the lake, forcing all of them to keep fighting on. When the fleet came here, they needed to know the land, they needed to know each other, and work as a well oiled machine. First, they had to survive that long. With all of them there, they doubted they’d run into many problems. They survived months in close quarters, and really the time-to-injury ratio was surprisingly low. It boded well for their future.

~End of Arc 1~
Chapter 28

Not that Preosh had a lot of experience, but she had enough to know that this could turn out horribly. Which was why she was digging through the slightly messy room to find where her shirt had fallen. At least she’d have a bit of time to look around before Ganmed woke up. Finding her shirt, somehow, half-behind the dresser, she put it on and looked over to the sleeping purpleblood.

She hoped he slept soundly, because she couldn’t really come up for an excuse for looking around and into his things. She’d just rather avoid another scene like the last one she had. Of course, Ganmed had no such reputation, and as far as his quadrants went, it was apparently pretty much normal for their caste not to find many or any at all before conscription. Most of them isolated from the population and each other. It seemed a bit bitter or cold of the carpenter drones, though judging by the ruthlessness she’d already witnessed, it was pretty much necessary for young trolls to keep surviving. Poor thing, though; he seemed rather starved for positive attention. A troll could really pity him over it…

She wasn’t quite sure where to start her little reconnaissance mission, so she opened the drawers of the dresser, taking a peek in. She felt a bit like a stalkerish moron, but she just wanted to avoid anything unnecessary. Especially here, and definitely not again. Seeing nothing but changes of clothes and what looked like a small box of safety-pins, she assumed that yes, dressers even for subjugs contained clothes and the means to repair them.

Her fingers brushed something papery as she went to close the bottom drawer, and she opened it again, pushing the clothing aside to discover a small notebook. A page had come loose and was sticking out; she could see colourful markings on it which suggested a drawing. Hm, so he liked artwork beyond the traditional blood murals. She pulled the notebook out and, glancing back to check that Ganmed was still asleep, pulled out the page, intending to satisfy her curiosity and put it back.

The drawing was a pair of crude stick figures, both in black and purple suggesting subjugglator uniforms. Going by the horn shape, one was supposed to be Ganmed, and the other was probably the Grand Highblood. Both wore broad toothy grins, and most of the paper was taken up with multicoloured scribbles. The stick-figure Highblood appeared to be ruffling stick-figure Ganmed’s hair, or possibly crushing his head, but context suggested the former.

Preosh stared at the picture for a moment, trying to make sense of what exactly was occurring. He wasn’t much of an artist, he should probably stick to the culling, but okay, it wasn’t too unusual for any recruit to think highly of such a successful troll.

Curiosity now sated, she opened the notebook once more, intent on replacing the picture so he might never know she saw it. She flipped to the general page she thought it had been at and was assaulted by lines of tiny, scribbly writing. Quirkless. He intended for others to read it. Though she assumed that this wasn’t the context he would have wished for it to be in.

She glanced over the lines and had to stop. She put the picture back and flipped the pages back, far enough she could be sure that it was relatively close to the start of what he’d written. She had to be sure. After reading another line, she was sure and she fought the urge to face-palm. Instead she stared down at the words as if they were meant to be completely baffling. Though this offered her a look into Ganmed’s thoughts, and she would take it even if it was silly. She flipped back a few more pages, finding herself close to the front of the notebook, at the beginning of his story.

*hi, THIS is MY first ATtempt WRITing WITHOUT MY quirk SO please FORgive MY spellING!*
Grand Highblood Makara was walking along the beach and he found a little purple grub that was
crying and he picked it up and then it stopped crying and he knew that this grub was the chosen one
who would grow up to be a great hero so he took it back to his ship which was the kind that goes on
water because this was before everyone went to space and then...

Preosh flicked forward a few pages.

... cut the ropes with the sharp fangs of the howlbeast skull atop his staff but his hand slipped and cut
through her dress as well and it fell off.

“Oh no,” she said. “My dress has fallen off.”

So he took off his clothes and they started to do it.

“STOP THAT” said the jadeblood who was still watching but they did not...

A sound from Ganmed alerted Preosh, and she slapped the notebook shut in a hurry as he sat up,
rubbing his eyes and yawning.

“Huh? Oh, hey, Preosh… what’s that?”

“Nothing!” she said hurriedly, holding the book behind her back. He wasn’t fooled, and crawled
closer, peering around her.

“Hey, that’s private!” He grabbed the notebook and straightened out a crumpled page corner with a
scowl and a blush. “It’s not ready for posting yet.”

“You write fanfiction,” Preosh said simply. It was a fact. Though her face obviously reflected at how
she felt about that revelation and how much of a terrible writer she thought he was. He scowled at
her, as she looked back at the notebook and pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. “You
wrote real-troll fanfic about your boss. And about a long-dead traitor and his followers just so you
could have your Mayree Tseouh rescue one you thought was cute?”

“It’s sort of the rough draft, and who cares? No one was supposed to see it yet.” Ganmed held the
notebook close to him, obviously not wanting to be judged on it. “Anyway, why were you looking
around my room? I guess I should say snooping. Looking to meddle in my personal crap to get
ahead?” Ganmed shook his head a moment after he said it. “That came off dumb, let me try again.
What I mean is are you trying to get me in trouble or something? Not that you’d offer… that to be
manipulative.”

“What? No!” Preosh shook her head. “Really, I wouldn’t do that to anyone. I just…” She toyed with
the idea of saying more. Well, he’d already been present when she’d been pushed into spilling the
details, what more harm could she do? And besides, he seemed… surprisingly trustworthy for a
follower of the Mirthful Messiahs. His presence was soothing, somehow. “Well, you know how
badly my last experience turned out. I just wanted to… make sure I could trust you.”

“Breaking my trust in you isn’t going to help much,” he said, frowning. “That wasn’t nice.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.” Preosh looked at her claws.

“Y’know, you could have just asked me right? I’m not really the kind to just let whoever the fuck
into my squares. I mean, I know you had it bad, but you could have told me you were worried.
Anyway, I’m a little more trustworthy than that seadweller. No intentions whatsoever to abandon my
faith for a guy who got racked up pretty easily and died. Didn’t even prove his worth as a prophet.” Ganmed broke his train of thought and looked towards Preosh. “Listen, Pre, I’m sorry too. I was thinking about a few things… Mind if we have a talk? I mean you did sort of have a look-around, so I might as well be honest with you.”

Preosh looked up at Ganmed, and stared for a moment. She could see something akin to guilt or worry, or something on his face that she didn’t want to see. She could feel herself wanting to chew on the inside of her lip from rage bubbling inside her. It wouldn’t be the first time, her poor taste got her pailing with a hypocrite.

“What?” she said, more stiffly than she’d intended, and didn’t miss his slight flinch.

“Well, see, that’s sort of the thing… I’ve been thinking, and… I mean, it was fun and you were great and all, but… I’m a little uncomfortable with, uh… I don’t think we should pail anymore because—”

“Because what?” She stood up, looming over him, and he tried to shuffle away and get to his feet at the same time and fell over backwards.

“Pre—”

“Don’t do that. Don’t call me Pre as if you have that right.” She wanted to growl, her fists were already balling up at her sides. “What the fuck is it with me, do assholes just get a little voice in their head saying ‘dump her once you use her nook’? Or am I somehow missing the sign that says ‘will sleep with you and is okay to be dumped’? Or am I really that terrible in bed that it’s only fair to dump me afterwards?”

“No, Preosh, Listen.”

“Why would I listen to you?”

“Yo, Preosh. I don’t—”

“You going to call me a slut too? Shit, I bet you were lying about getting around. You know you couldn’t scratch me into your book if I knew that. Fucking sick assholes all of you.”

“Preosh, listen to me. Come on.” He took a deep breath, and carefully reached out to touch her. She slapped his hand away, but he extended it again, and touched her hair. “I’m not dumping you. I just think… I mean, this is what I’m talking about. You’re so angry all the time, and it’s only gonna hurt you. No, I don’t mean that in a bad way! I just… I want to make sure it doesn’t.”

“So what? You’re going to pail me then we’re friends. Wonderful. That makes this so much better.”

“No, Pre, I’m saying that as uh, great as pailing you was… I’m thinking something a bit lighter. I mean, I don’t really like seeing you like this. You’re always angry and assuming that everyone is going to hurt you or use you. I mean, shit girl, it’s not good for you.”

Preosh’s body relaxed and her mind started to race. “You mean… oh. Oh, I’m sorry, I…”

“Yeah,” Ganmed said, smiling and moving closer, offering a hug. “Pale for you, Pre.”

He gasped as she hugged him hard enough to knock his breath out. “I’m sorry! I should have let you finish.”

“Yeah, well. I can help you stay calm, you can help me learn to put words in the right order?” Ganmed chuckled. He touched Preosh’s hair-ribbon; when she didn’t resist, he untied it and let her
hair fall out of its long ponytail. He gently ran his fingers through the mass of hair, humming soothingly until Preosh’s grip relaxed. “So, uh, am I to take it this is a thing now?”

Preosh thought about it for a moment, before she nodded a little. “I guess, yeah.” Ganmed’s claws were soft on her scalp. “I mean, I think it might work. I suppose it’s not unheard of for a purpleblood to take on a seadweller as a moirail… This isn’t because of your hero worship, right?”

“I don’t have any ill intent with your emotions, and really, if someone is toying with you like that or did… They deserve the slowest and most painful death I can imagine. And I’m pretty creative.”

“Okay, yeah, this is definitely a thing now, because you really could benefit from a moirail,” Preosh said. Ganmed beamed, apparently missing her meaning. “Well, we’re already in need of a shower. Would you like to…? She went slightly violet in the face, cleared her throat, and finished “… wash my hair?”

Ganmed gave her a little smile and nodded. “I’d be happy to, girl.” Ganmed shifted from where he was sitting, setting the notebook down, before grabbing something to cover his naked form with. He offered her his hand. “Well then, let us get ourselves purified.”

Preosh took his hand, bringing herself up to standing, Her shirt was long enough they could get to the showers without insult, as long as they didn’t bump into anyone. She glanced over to the only clock in the room, noting that it was unlikely anyone else was around, because the last thing she needed was to be hooted at by the other subjugs in the area.

As they walked out, arm in arm, she snickered.

“What?”

“‘His head exploded like a shaken Faygo bottle’? Really?”

“Hey, you can talk. I think I recognised your quirk on that site.”

“Oh, that, heh.” Preosh blushed. “Yeah, that one’s something of a tradition in our squad. The newbies all get the account password and add to it.”

“‘The Many Deaths of Lieutenant Gritch’?” Ganmed shook his head, smiling affectionately. “Eh, I’ve written worse. I noticed that one hasn’t updated in a while.”

“It became much less fun when we found out he was adding to it himself. I’m not sure if he was trying to be funny or if he actually meant to put us off…”

They laughed all the way to the shower block, pressing their hands to their mouths to avoid waking any potential snoopers.
Chapter 29

Between going out to town, watching a couple of movies, and getting a gift or two from the only adult around, the four teenagers had done nothing but hiked along the local woodland trails looking for the space-thing. A week later, they still hadn’t found it, and they were starting to get very frustrated. They had obtained a map, and most of it was covered in red marking where they had been. They had started another trip this morning, right when the sun rose, to get further into the woods. Now it was nearing eight o’clock at night and they stood at a fork in the path they didn’t remember. Which meant they were mostly lost; luckily they were together on the trail and Rose was looking over the map with Jade.

“I think we’re here, though it doesn’t have the fork on the map either,” Jade sighed. “It says we should go left. Though you’d think a fork on a trail would be marked in some way. Like a pile of rocks telling you how to get back to the start.”

“Maybe the trail is new?” John offered. “The map hasn’t been updated yet, but it does lead somewhere?”

“We do have our phones. We can always call a ranger. Or one of you could climb a tree and see if you can see the house from here,” Rose said, still looking at the two paths. “It looks as if the left one has been used more often, maybe that’s our best option.”

~~~

Vriska shifted from branch to branch, above the stumpy little mammal’s head. She couldn’t see it well in the dark, especially from this angle. But she could tell it was a good plump one, could make a very decent meal if the group ate the bones as well. They’d spent a week in the forest, scrounging on what they could; the seadwellers caught fish in the lake, Tavros guiltily lured in a few creatures with his animal communication abilities, and they’d found some non-poisonous plants, but they were still not happy hunting in unfamiliar and underpopulated territory, and were feeling the need for something more substantial. In the moonlight she caught glimpses of huge shining round eyes, which fortunately never looked upwards. She’d seen the little herd from a distance before, and this time they’d split up; luckily the big white barkbeast which followed them around seemed to be elsewhere at the moment. Carefully and as silently as possible, she slithered down the treetrunk.

~~~

“Where are you going? It’s dark, and if you get too far off the path it might be impossible to find you,” Rose called after Jade.
“I’m going to walk forward about twenty feet, see if I can find anything familiar. If I can’t then I’m going to put my foot behind me as turn until it’s pointing back here. This isn’t my first forest excursion. I’ve gotten lost in a jungle and gotten myself back. Don’t worry, Rose.”

“I wish we had a rope or something.”

“I’ll be okay. It’ll be a short excursion, hopefully get us back to the house and we can all settle into a movie or something. Search for space junk tomorrow.” Jade was smiling, and she walked forward. She was careful with her steps, making sure they stayed on the path, though this path was fairly new, the edges shaggy from not being walked that much. She had a feeling that this wasn’t the trail they took.

Something was ruffling the plants next to her. She had a feeling it was a deer, but on the off chance it was a coyote, she grabbed the can of mace she kept on her. It would blind the thing if it got too close. Keep its fear of humans alive, and possibly save her a few bites. She walked the twenty feet and looked around. Nothing about this route seemed familiar, it didn’t help that the sun had set and the moon was poor light. Things always looked so different at night.

~~~

Vriska loved it when prey moved away from the herd. She wasn’t the best hunter, better at catching trolls then beasts. But right now all of them were starving and other than the two back at camp protecting their ship everyone was out hunting. If Karkat could do it with his stubby little claws, so could she.

She hid in the brush, stalking the weird beast, wondering what it was. Luckily it had enough meat they could have a meal, if no one caught anything else. The beast was obviously agitated, looking for something; it always made her smile when prey knew a predator was looming. But the night and flora were on her side.

Closer, closer, and then she was close enough to pounce. She leapt from the brush with a cackle, the little thing turned around and squealed in terror, its hands came up, there was a spritz sound, and suddenly Vriska’s face was on fire.

She screamed, aware that her would-be prey was shrieking and running away, but she had no time to be angry at its loss. Her remaining eye watered uncontrollably, blinded, the poison working its way into the flesh of her empty socket. Her nose and mouth were burning so much she couldn’t breathe.
She clawed frantically at her face, leaving long blue scratches, and ran back in the direction of the ship.

~~~

Jade wasted no time turning around and running back to the group, screaming as well, her heart a staccato in her chest. She ran into Dave, who grabbed on to her, her body still trying to run, through she had relocated to the ground.

“Jade, Jade, woah, Jade,” he said, holding on to her trying to calm her down. It took a long moment before they could understand Jade’s breathless words.

“Monster! I saw a monster!”

“What?” Dave’s eyebrows rose slightly in the nearest thing he allowed himself to an expression of surprise. “Monster? Are you sure it wasn’t just … I don’t know. Do coyotes even live in woodlands? … No, that’s stupid, if it was a coyote you’d be hugging it or something.” He took a deep breath. Jade freaking out in terror was not normal. “What exactly did you see?”

“I don’t know, it was just big, and furry and it made some type of weird noise and it tried to pounce me.” Jade’s breath was slowly calming down, though it was obvious to anyone watching she was still panicked.

“Like…” John started slowly. “Bigfoot maybe?”

Jade looked over at John and shook her head. “I don’t think it was a sasquatch.”

“Could it be a bear or like a cougar? I don’t know the kind of animals that are out here,” Dave said, still rubbing Jade’s back, trying to get her to finish calming down.

“Maybe it was Bigfoot, Bigfoot came from a meteor that landed in the woods. How cool would that be? We find a space rock and Bigfoot.”

“John,” Jade said softly. “It wasn’t Bigfoot, Bigfoot isn’t real.”
“You’d think so, but, well, twenty years ago they said sylladexes were impossible, and our own families proved that wrong,” said Rose, pulling her water bottle from thin air and putting it back just to illustrate her point.

“Well, I guess now you mention it Bigfoot and a UFO at once is a bit of a stretch. I mean, more so than just one of those things.” John shook his head. “You know what I mean.”

“Indeed,” said Rose, tapping a finger on her lips thoughtfully. “As they say, the simplest explanation is probably the correct one, and if that was indeed something extraterrestrial which crashed, the idea of both that and an earthly monster being in these woodlands at once is too great a coincidence. I never thought I’d say this, but in this situation, it is quite possible that aliens are in fact the simplest explanation.”

John’s eyes lit up. “Cool!”

~~~

“Vriska, stop shrieking and tell us what the everloving fuck is going on!” Karkat ordered.

“My face is melting! My face is meeeeeeelting!”

“Okay, please calm down. Tavros, hold her head steady, please.” Tavros gently gripped Vriska’s horn to stop her thrashing. Kanaya touched Vriska’s face and sniffed her finger, and de-sylladexed bottles of ointment and eyewash. “It seems to be an oil-based toxin. It smells like … spices? What happened?”

Vriska tugged herself free of Tavros’ grip and scowled, eye still watering. “Some horrible little bug-eyed monkey creature sprayed this stuff at me! Lousy goddamn stupid prey not fighting fair … No need to hold me down, I can do it myself!” She took the eyewash bottle, filled up the cap, and held it to her eye, blinking it in. “Ow ow ow … Suddenly I’m kind of glad I only have the one eye. Geez, some researchers you guys are, you said this part of the planet was harmless!”

“It’s not my fault our information was shit! Pretty much nobody’s heard of this useless little rock!” Karkat ran a hand through his hair, groaning. “I definitely don’t remember anything about poison-spraying monkeys in the file. Sheesh, this place is weird.”
Rose wasn’t listening to the conversation; though she was worried for Jade, she was unharmed, just scared. In the distance she could hear something that sounded like cicadas mixed with crickets, mixed with something else entirely. It was fairly close, close enough she could tell it wasn’t any of those animals. Or if it was, the cicadas turned up late, the crickets were bigger, and she didn’t know what the other thing was.

“Everyone,” she said softly, “Listen!” The conversation discussing whether or not Bigfoot actually existed and whether or not aliens were a more logical choice tapered off.

“What?”

“Listen.” The group went quiet, listening to the noise on the breeze. “Do you hear that?”

“Yeah,” John said, shuffling his feet. “What is it?”

“Aliens,” Dave said with a smile. “Probably bugs, we’re just hypersensitive because Jade was attacked.”

“It’s almost a month too late for cicadas,” Rose said softly.

“We should go check it out,” Jade said, her voice still shaky. “The trail’s new, the other one is our trail home. But we should go check it out. Anyway, if it was a coyote or a fox, I might have seriously hurt it. If we find it is hurt we can call the rangers.”

“Are you sure you want to do that, Jade?”

“Yeah, the dark must have just freaked me out.” Jade took a breath and dusted off her clothes. “I don’t want some animal to suffer because I got a little scared.”

“I don’t know how smart this is,” Dave said, frowning slightly. “What if it’s not hurt and you just
made it mad? Or hell, what if it is aliens? Does pepper spray work on Reavers, or chestbursters, or whatever the fuck it might be?"

“Well, it certainly seemed to work on whatever that thing was …” Jade pulled out three more cans. “Here, I brought some for you guys too. Grandpa always says I should be sure to carry enough supplies.”

~~~

“Efurryone!” Nepeta’s voice was low, and the talk quickly subsided. “Something’s coming this way.” The group was quiet, listening to the sounds of the woods. They had grown quite accustomed to the typical noises, but there was something moving in the brush.

“Sollux, is the ship still hidden under leaves and branches?” Karkat whispered. Sollux nodded leaning his body towards the sound of undergrowth moving and the animal calls.

“Vriska?” Terezi’s whisper was sharp. “Did you let a predator know we were here?” She finished pulling out her cane sword.

Vriska was still fussing with her eye as she shook her head. “Only that stupid-looking monkey thing, and no way is that any kind of competent predator.”

Sollux blinked, or at least his eyebrows made a motion which suggested he was; it was hard to tell with his glasses. “Monkey thing? What did it look like?”

Vriska waved her hands vaguely. “About yay big, googly eyes, beige face, long mane of hair …”

Sollux decaptchalogued a sketch. “Did it look like thith?”

Vriska’s bloodshot eye lit up. “Yeah! … Oh fuck, that’s the sentient species on this planet, isn’t it?”

Terezi rapped Vriska’s horn with her cane. “Nice going, genius.”
“Fuck. Okay, okay, we can deal with this …” Karkat glanced around wildly. “Nepeta! Congratulations, you’re our ambassador!”

“What?! Why me?”

“Because you’re both one of our close-combat experts and probably the least threatening-looking one of us if you put your claws away. Just go out there and try to look cute.”

“Vantas, I must protest at your reckless endangerment of my moirail!”

“Do you have a better idea? Then shut up and get your bow. Ampora, is your depth perception fucked up to the point you can’t use that gun? No? You’re sure you won’t blow Nepeta’s head off? Good. Then both of you and Sollux cover her and we’ll all be waiting in the wings in case anything goes wrong.”

Nepeta nodded. “Okay, it’s okay, Equius. You’ll be watching over me.” She looked nervous as she walked forward, heading towards the noises of the quickly-approaching other species. She took a breath and walked through the trees, standing right in their line of sight.

~~~

All four stopped; there was a shadow standing in front of them. They brought their flashlights up to it. It was too small to be a bear, but they weren’t sure what it was. All of them gasped as they took in the thing before them. It looked human enough, but enough was different that it was uncanny. It took everything in them not to run away.

All of them had to come to some very quick terms with their situation. First, the space junk they had been trailing was likely a spaceship, with aliens. Aliens existed. They were the first humans to ever meet aliens. That was if this wasn’t some very elaborate practical joke, which it might have been if John didn’t looked just as freaked out as the rest of the other humans, and John wasn’t that great of an actor.

The tiny thing clapped her hands together and made a noise. Something like growling, chirping, hissing, and confusion. The human group stared for a long moment, and the tiny alien shifted, almost looking behind her, before she tried again.
The thing spoke, or at least that's what it sounded like. They were pretty sure there were words mixed with the noises. Or maybe it was making noises before it latched on to one of their faces and implanted its spawn. Or any other numerous amount of things an alien might do to them.

"Haai-low! I ohm Nepeta! We nawt har ta hot ou!" It waited a moment, then made more noises. "We awre nace ben-ings!" There was a “we” in there; maybe it was trying to speak.

~~~

“Hello!” Nepeta tried to speak the language they had been learning from the stolen files. “I’m Nepeta Leijon, I’m from Alternia!” She made up the best translation for their planet. “We aren’t here to hurt you.”

The monkey-like things were staring at her. Obviously she hadn’t even said anything close to their actual language. She tried again. “Hello?” Still no response, they were just frozen staring at her. She could feel the others at her back. She hoped these beings weren’t hostile. They looked more surprised and scared then ready to fight, but aliens were aliens. Nepeta cleared her throat and tried to speak again.

"Hello. I am Nepeta! We are not here to hurt you." The strange pink skinned things were staring at her. She took a breath and tried again. "We are nice beings." Maybe that would make more sense, she really hoped the database wasn’t corrupted, or they’d got the wrong planet’s transmissions.

"Oh," one of them said. "You're trying to talk."

~~~

Nepeta cleared her throat. “Sar-we. We know ‘ow to re-aid yer lang-ige, bat we’ve ne-var ad a sh-ance to ear ou speck it. Prac-tis-ing am-ong airsel-es do-esn’t rally wark.”

The humans took a moment to translate. The odd buzzing sounds interspersed with the words were fainter now, at least.

"Are those horns?"
"Yas."

"You're an alien?"

"Yo-u-re an al-ee-en to may! But yas, I ood be."

"Like from space?"

"Yas."

"What are you doing here?"

"My frands and I lawn-ded her to re-cov-er. Mar like crawshed, bat we air her to get batter. Or is it ‘better’?"

"It’s ‘better’,” Jade said. She looked at the other kids before looking back at Nepeta. “Well, I guess that makes sense... insofar as aliens landing anywhere make sense..."

Rose shook her head, smiling slightly in disbelief. "We have contacted alien life, and it's a lolcat. Dave, does your camera phone work in the dark? You can take some pictures for witty captioning."

“Anyone think to bring a cheeseburger?”

“No, stumbling on lolcat aliens was not on today’s itinerary, but you could always poorly edit one in.”

“Or it could be like one of those ‘i ated it’ ones,” John added, still blinking at Nepeta in shock.

“It’s alright, my phone camera doesn’t have a flash. Flashlight lighting would be shitty, and plus it wouldn’t do this justice. When we get back to the house I’ll pull out my actual camera and snap some pictures for captioning.”
“What? Who said anything about going back to the house with these aliens?”

“Well, we’re close and I can get my camera. Don’t have to be so afraid of a little fun, Rose.”

“Well, bringing monsters home is one passive-aggressive gambit Mom couldn’t counter,” John said.

“I yam not a mon-ster! My nahm is Nepeta, and I yam a trall!” Her English was getting better as she listened to them say the words.

“Hey, does this mean we’ve been trolled?” Dave said with a little smirk on his face.

John blinked, and raised both hands. “Uh. We come in peace?” He laughed a little, the situation so odd he couldn’t help it.

Jade’s brow wrinkled. “Wait, it was one of these creatures that I maced, but this isn’t the same one. The other was a lot bigger, lots of hair ...”

“Oh, tha’ was Vwhiskers - sarry, Vriska,” Nepeta said, with a smile. Already her speech sounded much clearer, as she cut down on the buzzing and humming and the humans got used to her peculiar pronunciations. “Don’t worry, she’s not mad about it - she thinks it’s kind of cool you can do that! We can’t spray poison from aur hands!”

“But we can’t spit-” John started to say, looking at his own hand.

“Oh man, you guys can’t spit poison from your hands?” Dave interrupted enthusiastically. “That must suck, it’s the best weapon in the whole world, you’re just walking along and someone attacks you, poison! And you can use it to add spice to your tasteless food-”

“Dave, she’s an alien, she’s already confused,” Rose said, poking him in the side. “Stop trying to get her goat.”

“I don’t have a goat anyway so he can’t get it,” said Nepeta, frowning and swishing her tail. “I don’t even know what this goat is.”
“Figure of speech.”

“I feel bad though, I shouldn’t have maced her.”

“Damn right, but I don’t mind!” came a yell, followed by the crashing of something moving through the undergrowth. “Can you show me how to do that?” A tall wild-haired figure with bared fangs and a single glittering eye emerged from the shadows.

“AAAH! MONSTER!” John clutched Jade, who readied her mace again.

“What the fuck is that thing?” Dave gasped, his cool slipping slightly.

“That’s Vriska!” said Nepeta, sounding hurt.

“Tha’zz me!” said the monster, nodding. Her speech was as unsure as Nepeta’s, underlaid with odd buzzing and chirruping, but now they had picked up Nepeta’s accent it was much easier to understand her.

“No, no, you’ve got to try to only use your middle voicebox!” Nepeta told her, gesturing to her throat.

Vriska’s brow furrowed. “You mean like this?” she said, sounding much clearer.

“That’s right!” Nepeta said proudly. “And the Earthlings are furry sorry for being so rude, aren’t you?”

“Hey, I don’t mind!” Vriska declared proudly, striking a pose. “I should be feared! I am a stone-cold killer! I am the greatest pirate in the history of Alternia, terror of the seas and skies!”

“Not helping, Vriska, we’re supposed to be making furriends!”
“Awwwwwwww. Fine, spoilsport.” Vriska dropped back into a slouch and waved. “Hello, little pink things. My name’s Vriska Serket, I won’t actually harm you. Sorry about the misunderstanding earlier, I didn’t realise you were this planet’s sapient life-form.”

Rose relaxed. “Okay, it’s ... nice ... to meet you, I guess. How many of you are there? Just the two?”

“Oh no, there are twelve of us altogether. Uh, if you thought Vriska was scary you might want to brace yourselves when you meet Equius and Gamzee. They’re even bigger, and Gamzee’s a bit jumpy, so please don’t scream in front of him.” She looked around and yelled “Okay, guys, remember to speak Earthian! You can come out now - remember what we agreed, scariest first!”

The humans didn’t scream, but it took effort.

A huge, hulking troll with a broken horn crashed out of the brush, cracked dark glasses glittering on his scowling face. Nepeta danced over to him and hugged his arm, announcing “This is Equius! C’mon, say hi!” The troll in question became significantly less scary when he coughed nervously and, to the humans’ amazement, dropped into a stiff bow, carefully saying “Good evening. I am most pleased to make your... ac-quain-tance.” He hissed something to Nepeta, who nodded and replied in troll language, and his lip twitched in a slight smile.

The troll introduced as Gamzee was worse. He was noticeably taller than Vriska despite his stoop, though also much thinner, looming over them, and his face was covered in purplish lines which gave him a distinctly barbaric look. He did something which was probably an attempt to smile, exposing jagged fangs, and slurred “Aw, c’mon, tiny space monkeys, don’t be scared!” He followed it up with a quiet honking noise which might have been a laugh or a cough or something else entirely. Dave tensed and clenched his fists, and Jade and John backed away.

“What, you think the boys are scary now?” Vriska asked, grinning. “Just be glad they’ve not pupated yet, in a few sweeps they’re gonna be twice that size.” Gamzee’s hackles rose and he glared at her. A much smaller troll boy snapped something at her, taking Gamzee’s hand. The big troll relaxed instantly, despite his friend’s tone.

“It’s okay, Gamzee’s harmless as long as I’m here,” said the short troll. “My name’s Karkat, and we can’t very well keep thinking of you lot as ‘the soft pink things’, so do you have names?”

“Uh, I’m John Egbert, this is Jade Harley, Rose Lalonde, and Dave Strider, We are humans... Umm mostly from the US, Earth, etc. I think we’re okay to see the rest of you now. Sorry we freaked out.”
Karkat squinted at Jade’s eyes. “Jade? Huh, I’d have guessed lime.”

Jade giggled. “Aw, you’re funny!”

A fwoosh sound and a glittering caught the humans’ attention, and they stared at the enormous caramel-coloured butterfly wings on the back of the new arrival.

“Wow!” Jade gasped, eyes alight. “Soooo pretty.”

“Uhh, thank you, miss.” When he got closer they could see this troll bore a pair of huge, deadly-looking horns, but he seemed to be blushing and smiling, and he was actually rather cute. “You are a ‘miss’, right? I’m Tavros.”

Dave dramatically removed his shades, blinked exaggeratedly, polished the lenses on his sleeve, and put them back on. In the process, he missed the funny look Equius and Karkat were giving his eyes. “Okay, so we have the lolcat, the living truck, the freaky skeleton dude and his living tranquiliser shot, and the unholy offspring of a bull and a butterfly. Nice mix.”

“Try the insufferable hipsterfish,” said Karkat with a smirk.

“Hey!” Said “insufferable hipsterfish” proved to be a slim fin-faced troll in a long striped scarf. He wore glasses with only one lens, the empty side revealing an eyepatch. Another finned troll, this one a girl, emerged beside him, giggling and waving, hand in hand with a troll boy wearing what appeared to be 3D glasses.

“Hi, my name’th Tholluckth, thith ith Eridan and Feferi, the one coming up behind uth ith Aradia” said the latter, pointing.

“Before you start mangling it, he means ‘Sollux’,“ Karkat interrupted. “He never could get rid of that lisp.”

Aradia was smaller, but she was unique. Half of her body was made up of mechanical parts. She smiled at them, and the humans couldn’t help but feel as if she was looking through them and not at them. She stood beside Sollux, taking in the forest, or maybe the humans; they couldn’t entirely tell with her robotic eye.
“Terezi will come out shortly, more than likely with Kanaya.” The robot-alien hybrid spoke nearly perfect English, though her voice had a slight mechanical flare to it. “That would be the last of us.”

“Thankth, AA.”

The one introduced as Terezi came out tapping a cane on the ground, though it didn’t seem to be for sight, as she navigated just fine when she stopped tapping it on the ground. After her came a slightly taller other troll, who stood out among the horde in a brightly colored dress. She gave a graceful nod of the head before she introduced herself as Kanaya Maryam.

“Okay! It’s really nice to meet you all!” John said, smiling and extending a hand. “Do trolls shake hands? Don’t worry, I won’t spray poison.” He chuckled. Nepeta reached out and took his hand, and John stopped at the squishy feeling between her fingers. He glanced down. “... Is that blood?”

“Um.” Nepeta paused and glanced sideways at the other trolls, who looked worried. Suddenly, her lip started to tremble, and her eyes filled with green-tinted tears, before she exploded into sobs. “I’m sooooo sorry! We were so hungry! It was only one little antlerbeast!” She wept into her hands, hunching her shoulders and turning away. “W-we’ve been on the ship for ages, we ran out of food, we had to find something!”

“Ohh, it’s okay! Come here,” John said, opening his arms to her. “Do trolls hug?”

The trolls stared at John for a moment, then looked between each other with a strange expression on their faces. They were doing their weird click-chirping again, which the humans guessed was their language. Eridan - at least John was pretty sure that was Eridan - was staring at him. Rose nudged John in the ribs, quickly followed by her cousin, giving John a distinct being squished feeling.

“Do you think it’s really wise to just meet aliens and hug them? What if one of them implants their spawn in your throat or something?” Dave said, leaning closer so John could hear his whisper.

“Don’t be stupid. They’re obviously out of their element and afraid. I don’t think they are going to hurt us.” John totally missed Nepeta’s wink to the rest of the trolls.

“Well!” Rose said, clapping her hands. “We’ll freeze to death if we stand out here all night. Wouldn’t you like to come home and meet my mother? I’m sure she’ll be... thrilled to meet you.”
“Your mother?”

“Yes, my mother. She would quite enjoy meeting you. Also, it would be nice to return home.”

The trolls looked between each other; there was an obvious nervousness. They weren’t speaking, just looking at each other. Karkat shrugged and soon the others returned the gesture. He turned back to face the four humans, and nodded slowly.

“I suppose we could see you back to your hive... or home. Just don’t try anything funny.”

“Oh no, we don’t want to do anything weird. It’s just, we’ve never seen an alien before, and it would be really cool to see you all, not when it’s kind of cold out. And dark. Just don’t like attack us, eat us, or--”

“Latch onto our mouths and shove your children down our throat so they burst out of our chest later.”

All of the trolls grimaced, the thought obviously disgusting to them. “Why in the ever-loving fuck would we do that?” Karkat, the short one with nubby horns, was nearly shouting.

Dave decided that hearing an alien say “fuck” had to be one of the funniest things ever and couldn’t hold in the slight laugh. “We have movies,” Dave said, trying to get a handle on his voice. “About aliens, that’s one of them. It’s a popular feature in alien movies that humans are used for breeding.”

“I see. Well, you have nothing to worry about.” Dave looked towards the alien in the more colorful clothes. Kanaya, if he remembered right. “It is impossible for us to truly breed on this planet. I do have a matriorb; however, in the time it would take to grow and hatch, then be viable to lay eggs, most of us would be well on in our... that’s odd. Sollux, there is no word for -- “ Then she made a clicking noise.

“Don’t look at me, I’m not the recon drone with thitty data.” The 3D troll spoke. “Humanth, that’th what you call yourthelveth, right?”

“Yes, we would be humans,” Rose said slowly.
“What’th your word for a pathage of time? I can find dayth, week, aphelion, but after that thingth get weird.”

“Ah, well, we would use day, meaning the sun has risen, set, and half of night has happened. Week is seven of those days. Month, which I think is why you chose aphelion, is generally four weeks. Then you have twelve months in a year. Then ten years in a decade. Ten decades is a century, and ten centuries is a millennium.” The aliens were all staring at Rose.

“Rose, I think that was a TMI. They are already lost and confused,” John said softly.

“Oh geez, imagine how hard it is to learn an alien language. I mean, learning Chinese is hard for English speakers but can you imagine learning English as a completely different species? Maybe we drop them into the nuances of language slowly,” Jade said with a nod. “Did what Rose said make sense, trolls?”

“Yeah, we juth need to keep it thtored,” Sollux said softly. “Thhit, I’m going to have to do tho much updating.”

“As if you mind,” Feferi said. “You like being busy and without our boat to renew you’ve got small to do.” Feferi grimaced. “I, apparently, am terrible at figuring this thing out. How do I speak this Earthian?” She sighed. “We would all be happy to join you in your movement.”

The humans looked at each other. All of them knowing that this was stupid. They shouldn’t be inviting a horde of aliens obviously full of natural defenses home with them. It was one of the obvious horror movie sins. Never invite the strange creepy things home. Yet, looking at all of the trolls, despite claws, horns, and fangs, they looked like kids. Kids who were too skinny, just as afraid as they were, and jumpy. Something inside all of them said: If you leave these aliens here scientists are going to find them and experiment and test on them. None of the humans could imagine going through something like that at their age. Especially since some of the trolls looked younger than them.

John smiled towards the group of twelve. “Well, if everyone is in agreement, let’s head to Ros-- our house.” He glanced sideways at the other three humans, who all gave him a little nod. Hopefully, Mom would be just as accepting as they were. Maybe she’d see what they all saw.

“Well, no point in hanging around outside,” Rose said. “Follow me.” She turned, moving back on the path towards the fork in the road that started all of this, smiling to herself about the symbolism
when a small cough from behind her drew her attention.

“My ... ‘Rose-Lalonde’, was it?” Equius extended an arm. “If it is true that your species’ night vision is poor, perhaps you would appreciate an escort? It would simply not do for such a fine highborn lady to trip and fall.”

Rose blinked, but took his arm anyway, amid stifled snickers from her friends. “Well, it’s nice to see courtesy extends across the bounds of space. And please do call me Rose.”

Eridan looked hopefully at John. “I don’t suppose you might be wwantin’ help?”

“Uh, I think I can walk on my own. But thanks.” John laughed, and Eridan chuckled nervously along with him.
“What’s a ‘mother’?” Feferi whispered to Tavros.

“Uhh, it’s a mammal thing. They raise their own young. A ‘mother’ is a female beast with wrigglers.”

“Wait, so those are wriggler humans? I thought they were about our age.”

“Maybe not, herd animals stick together when they’re adults.” Tavros shrugged. “I guess we’ll, uhh, find out soon.”

“I don’t know if we can take on a herd... Maybe they are our age, but they don’t reach maturity until later. They have long lifespans so they stay with their ‘mothers’ for an extended period of time. Beyond when we would...”

Mock-casually, Tavros spoke up in English. “So, how many humans are there in your... herd? Pack? What’s the word?”

“We prefer ‘family’,” Jade replied. “There’s just us four and Rose’s mom living at the house at the moment. Good thing we’re pretty far out from civilisation, there’s nobody else to run into you guys.”

“She goes by ‘Mom’ or ‘Mother’ to me and John, ‘Auntie Anne’ to Dave and Jade, and you should probably stick with ‘Doctor Lalonde’ until she tells you otherwise,” Rose said, looking back over her shoulder and yelping as Equius gently lifted her over a protruding rock in the path.

“Wow, uhh, that’s a lot of names.”

“I suddenly realize that, it is indeed a lot of names. However, you only need to know one, until she tells you otherwise. That is Doctor Lalonde.”

Equius nodded. “Doctor? Does she work in the medical field, or is there another definition we do not know?”

“The title ‘doctor’ is because she received her doctorate in school. Though she does know some basic medical information, though nothing that would qualify her to serve in the field of medicine.”

“I see, as long as I understand her title correctly there shall be no problems, Miss Lalonde. I would hate to offend.”

The group emerged from the woods, and the trolls looked as Rose pointed out her house. The design was unfamiliar, all white and boxy, but it was huge, bigger than anyone under Vriska’s level could have had - only to be expected from someone with seadweller-purple eyes - and, in an odd way, beautiful. A stream tinkled over rocks, a warm light glowed in the window.

“So, that’s your hive?” Karkat asked slowly. “Or is it like a hivestem?”

“If by hive you mean house, or place which I dwell, then yes, it is just mine and my mothers. Though Dave and Jade are staying the summer. John will be moving in soon, as will his father.”

“I see, so your lusii or guardians move in with each other? Did you lose your hive, John?” Karkat felt like an idiot asking all these questions, but better to get as much knowledge as possible.

“No, I didn’t lose my house. Her mom and my dad are in love, so they are going to move in with
each other. I have a feeling that’s a conversation we should have later, if it doesn’t make sense. Not right now, I’m pretty much useless right now, because I’m surrounded by aliens. I’m surrounded by legitimate aliens.”

"Okay, it might be a good idea if you guys stand back while we go tell Auntie Anne what’s going on,” Jade said, directing the trolls to stand at the bottom of the garden path. “If we just open the door on you she’ll freak out. Just stay here, we’ll only be a moment...”

The humans, moving stiffly and nervously, still unsure, walked up to the house, and Rose knocked. The trolls’ view of the door was blocked, but when it opened they saw a warm, welcoming light, and a glimpse of hair as pale blonde as Rose’s.

“Kids!” came an unfamiliar slurred voice. “Where have you been, I wassh sho worried?”

“Heyy, Momlonde!” Dave hugged the hidden figure and cleared his throat in an attempt to stall for time. “Uh, well, you’re probably not gonna believe this, but remember that meteor crash last week...? Yeah, it wasn’t a meteor.”

“Maybe it’ll be easier if we just show you. Uh, please don’t freak out, Mom, please?” John begged.

“Whasch ish going on.”

“Well,” Jade said slowly, trying to pick her words as carefully as possible. “We might have found, what I means to say.. Would this be of the fifth kind? This might be better to see.”

“Mom, I am about to ask you if I can keep it.” Rose said nodding her head in the direction of the Trolls. She moved out of the way so the adult could walk out of the door and follow them on to the partially lit lawn. “I suppose I should say ‘them’, though calling them an it is more fitting to the saying.”

“What are you talkin -- Oh my god.” The adult paused looking at the horde of trolls who were tense, ready to grab their weapons. “Oh god, oh my god.” she began chanting until it was nothing more than a slur of noises.

The trolls stared. The adult human looked almost exactly like Rose, not even much taller. She was slim and pale, not particularly threatening. The huge white barkbeast they’d seen with the humans limped out behind her; its front paw was bandaged, which was presumably why it hadn’t been out, but it seemed lively enough, and fortunately friendly, if wagging tails and lolling tongues meant the same among Earth beasts.

Gamzee tensed as he saw her. Her figure, her posture, something about it was just familiar enough to be uncomfortable. Her nails were long and sharp-looking, and her eyes were pink. But after a couple of seconds he wanted to laugh; she was so unlike the Condesce in every other way it was like a bad cartoon of her. The human was shorter and slimmer than him and smiling for real, looking actually friendly, exposing flat white teeth which couldn’t puncture troll skin if she tried. When he looked closer, her nails were thin and soft, also harmless. Best of all, she was clearly drunk. Not frightening in the least.

Bec crouched, ready to pounce, favouring his bandaged paw, and growled at the unfamiliar figures. Tavros scurried over and held out a hand, and Bec instantly calmed. The humans were too distracted to find this terribly surprising.

“Rosey...” The adult’s voice squeaked when she spoke. She pointed at the trolls. “What’s going on?”

“Mother, we happened to run into extraterrestrial life on one of our hikes. We invited them over for
dinner.”

“Thesh are real aliens?”

“Indeed, madam, we would be “real” aliens,” Equius said, before giving Dr Lalonde another stiff bow. “I hope we are not intruding.”

“You're not,” Rose said. “That meteor crash was their ship crash landing. That’s why I’m guessing there was less impact damage than everyone thought. We were looking for the meteor when we stumbled upon them. I couldn’t leave them outside, plenty of humans are looking for the crash site. I don’t know if I can willingly drop some kids into the government’s hands to be interrogated or tested on.”

Doctor Lalonde stood frozen for a long time looking at all twelve of the trolls. Listening to Rose’s worries, she couldn’t help but sympathize. She had a million questions and a very real innate fear. She couldn’t imagine that among a big group of humans. For a moment she was very proud of her daughter and the choice in her friends. They were so altruistic and willing to help; she knew that could be dangerous, but it was a beautiful trait.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “What shoush we do? Oh, oh, first we should all get inside! We don’t want someone to shtumble by.” Doctor Lalonde moved back towards the door beckoning the trolls and the humans towards the inside of the house.

“Feed them probably, they said they ran out of food and were hunting deer.”

“We can do that, Rosey,” The trolls looked at the door warily before moving forward. Karkat in the front, taking the lead with a hint of trepidation. “We’ll talk more inside.” It didn’t take much goading before the trolls moved closer to the house.

“Thank you, mother.”

The twelve aliens looked toward each other, all of their hands poised to pull out their weapons, in case this was a trap. They might not have had home field advantage, but these humans seemed stupid and squishy enough, and there were twelve of them and five humans. Those odds were pretty good. Aside from their hand poison, the humans seemed pretty defenseless.

“So Rosey, whatsh the plan?”

“I hadn’t really gotten that far.” The group moved into the living room - or the common relaxation block, for the other half. They looked over the collection of items, confused and slightly nervous. Huge sentinels in robes with something on their faces that looked like hair. or maybe it was fur, none of them could be sure. There was also what looked like a statue of a bronze electric suction cleaner, placed on a pedestal. “I got to move them out of harm’s way, and perhaps feed them, and if mother doesn’t freak out too much perhaps give them shelter.”

“Okay, so, we hash to think about what we are going to do in the long run, but that could probably wait until tomorrow.”

“Is this your lusus? Or are you adults...? You don’t look like grubs, or wrigglers...” Karkat said, interrupting the talk between Rose and her mom, his nerves evident. Although all of the other trolls were quite proud of Karkat; he hadn’t started shouting just yet.

“Mammal thing!” Tavros quickly interrupted.

“Grubs? Wiggler?”
“Baby trolls, and young trolls. Sort of, it’s more, uh, slang. Sorry...” Tavros said. “It’s nice to meet you, Miss Other Lalonde.” He smiled brightly, hoping to cover most of the gracelessness of the other trolls.

“Aren’t you just the sweeteh little alien!” Miss Lalonde was smiling at them. “Thish is amashing, Rose honey, you know how lucky we are?”

Rose sighed, but whatever she wanted to say was cut off by Jade. “Technically, I think this is illegal. So you’d have risk, Auntie Anne.”

“I don’t mind, they look like they are made of shkin an’ bones. Plush, to think there are aliens! We want them to know earth is a friendly place. We can feed them... I don’t know what, though.”

“It might be advantageous for us to order food in. I think we lack the proper amount to feed 12 new mouths.”

“Pizza it is!” The adult human stumbled towards the phone.

Rose shook her head, looking rather stunned. “I can’t believe she isn’t phased. Seriously, okay with everything, then she turns around and says she’s ordering pizza, how do I even begin to win this?”

There was a sudden squeak, though there was something else to the noise. All the humans jumped, looking around for what made the noise. Tavros blushed, pulling something from the top of his head and hiding it behind his back. Bec growled.

“Did you bring a dangerous wild animal into my house?” Rose asked.

“No, no! He’s not a wild animal... He’s my lusus, and he came after us when we were walking. I can’t leave him outside. He’s not dangerous, I promise.” Tavros held the bullfairy out in front of him and the humans stared at the odd creature.

“Awww, he’s so cute!” Jade tentatively reached out a hand. “Is he okay with strangers?” Tinkerbull answered the question by gently butting against her hand and chirping. Bec jumped up, barking jealously, and Jade patted him with her other hand until he calmed down and sniffed the little bull cautiously.

“Lusii raise us, in place of your mammal adults. They tend to be really good with what they see as other beings in need of raising... As long as you don’t try to attack me, all should be, uhh, good.”

“Wait, this is like your mom-dad?” Dave asked, looking at the little creature.

“Yes, I think, he is akin to my, uhhh, parent? Is that your word? My translator, is saying that means ancestor, but that’s not what I mean. The word lusus comes up under the name mom. But I know what all of you, uhh, meant. I know a lot about animals... Sort of my, uhh, hobby.”

“Tavros, stop rambling.” The humans were pretty sure that it was Vriska who whined. “It’s giving me a massive headache.”

“I just want to be sure, we’re explaining ourselves correctly. It wouldn’t be the, uhh, first time this technology got something wrong. Or miscommunication did something bad.”

“It’s okay, I think I get it. A symbiotic relationship, is that it?...” Jade looked at Tavros. “I’m sorry, is it inappropriate for me to pet your parent?” Tavros shook his head, and Jade grinned and rubbed the little bull’s belly, watching as its legs wiggled happily. “Oh, who’s a cute little alien critter? Who’s cuter than a Tribble? Is it you? Yes it is!”
Tavros smiled. “He is really friendly, and I think he likes your planet. Of course, you’re also very
touch, Lusii are very, uhh, good judges of character.”

Rose was about to ask a few more questions regarding the creature in her house when a sudden noise
interrupted her train of thought. It took her a moment to comprehend. Terezi sneezed violently, again
and again, and Karkat ran to hold her. “Are you okay?”

“I- achoo! It’s the - achoo! - flower smell! The house smells all purple and the - achoo! - flower smell
is clashing with it!”

Rose guiltily hurried to unplug the air freshener and open the windows. “Sorry, is that better?”

“Yeah, thanks. It’s just it was messing with my ability to see... Or smell around the house, since I
can’t actually see.”

“So you can smell your way around?” Dave asked slowly.

“Oh taste it, but I didn’t think you all want me to lick you, just yet.” Both of Dave’s eyebrows raised
and he watched the troll standing next to her slap his palm to his forehead. Facepalms were
apparently a universal constant.

Jade scurried over with the takeout menu and a pen. “Okay, you say you’ve been on this planet a
while, so I guess by now you’ll have some idea of what you can safely eat here. What kind of things
are you okay with?”

“Well, we can eat just about anything organic,” Sollux explained, “but if you want to keep uth
happy, meat and sugar ish good for moth of uth.”

“Sounds easy enough.” Jade glanced over the menu. “Any special dietary requirements? Allergies?
Any vegetarians?”

She was not prepared for the shocked looks she received, nor the way the trolls backed away
slightly.

“Whoa! You can’t ask that in public!” Karkat sounded horrified.

“... I’ll take that as a no. Never mind - Auntie Anne, I think it would be easier just to order a bunch
of everything and sort it out once it arrives.”

‘Thash a good idea... Jush order two of everthin. And then we’ll separate it here. Also, will they get
ishcream? I want ishcream.”

“They might bring us some if we ask and promise to pay extra, we’re ordering so much anyway they
might be kind enough to do it.” Rose looked over the menu. “When I call I’ll ask. It’s going to be
some time though, more than 30 minutes. I hope that’s alright.”

The trolls nodded. All of them were glancing around the house, trying to get a good lay of the land.
None of them were too sure that they should be in an enclosed space with these humans. Doctor
Lalonde noticed their nervousness. “While we wait for the food, howsh about a tour? Our housh, is a
bit bigger than most humans, but it’s pretty typical.” The trolls nodded, falling into some type of
orderly line, and following behind the adult human.

John decided he had about a million questions, and the deep desire to run outside and scream that he
found aliens. Maybe buy a billboard and announce it, or maybe just a public service announcement
would be better. The image of him in a suit sitting behind a desk announcing he found aliens then
flipping his shit when he pointed out that he had discovered them made him start laughing.

Rose was busy talking on the phone, ordering all of the pizzas and seeing if she could use her superior communication skills to manipulate the company into picking them up ice cream. Dave and Jade were watching the trolls be given a tour, watching their reactions to each of the rooms and the things inside of them. Occasionally Jade or Dave would hear them mutter something in the singy-bug noises they assumed was their mother tongue. There were back in the main downstairs area going up the stairs, when one of the trolls turned around looking right at Dave and Jade.

“So, question monkeys.” The troll cleared her throat. “We’ve been debating. is it Ereth, Eart, or Earth? Because all of you say it differently, and all of them are too scared and stupid to ask. So, it was left to me to take charge and ask.”

“Uhh,” Dave said. “I’m from Texas, so I know I have a bit of an accent. But it’s ‘Earth’.” Dave made sure to over enunciate it.

The troll that asked turned back to the group and announced “Earth” triumphantly. There was a little more of the clicking bug language, before another troll looked back at them then turned to the rest of the group and snapped at them in it. They paused, and he said something that sounded like one prolonged word, but the humans were pretty sure it was a sentence, if not a couple.

“I hesitate to point out the irony of you telling us this in Alternian,” another one of the female trolls said. “Perhaps we should wait to lay out ground rules until we have a better idea of the situation.”

“Who’s the fucking leader here, Kanaya? Because last time I check no one elected you.”

“No, one elected you either, you just sort of usurped the spot--”

“In the truest leader fashion, what do you think a vote for leader matters? Vriska would vote for herself, and bully Tavros into voting for her as well.”

“I would make sure that didn’t happen, or do you doubt my abilities as a...” The female trailed off. “Well, there is no word for it in this language. I would continue this debate, however the limitations of this language are disallowing me from doing so.”

“I’m sure, how can you debate it?”

“Uhh, guys. We are still with the humans, so if you wouldn’t mind, uhh, pausing this for later?”

“Or newer.”

“Oh, ah. We do apologise,” the female said. “We had a slight disagreement. We did not intend to hold up your tour, do continue, I am sure Karkat is willing to postpone his rambling tirade for later.”

Dave and Jade looked between each other and shrugged. The tour finished up with little more interruption. Jade noticed that their muttered conversation was now in English, even if it was in weird accented bug-English. It seemed as If Karkat had told them to no longer speak in Alternian.

They finished up the tour and once again settled in the living room. All of the trolls were still looking a little nervous, but they seemed a bit more at ease. The humans were doing their best to give them time to adjust and understand that they weren’t going to harm them.

“So,” John eventually broke the silence. “How did you end up in our... Solar system?”

“We-” Karkat started, but then went silent.
“We’re deserters,” Vriska said. “We left our planet, and their territory because we didn’t want to join the... battle..group..”

“Army?” Rose offered. Vriska shrugged.

“Sure, all of us were friends in our...grub- childhood, and so we all ditched together. We stole a ship and were going to a remote planet, yours to be precise. To refill our supplies, then carry on running. Probably would have become space pirates or something.”

“Well, that’s mostly all of it, it’s kind of hard to explain.”

“It would be an exchange that should be had on a full stomach.” Rose scowled at the phone. “I probably should be offended that they thought it was a crank call until I mentioned the name ‘Lalonde’.”

“Oh, so you were here to refill... refill what?”

“Food, water, supplies, etcetera, then we would have taken off again. Had our wing not ripped off our ship you never would have even known we were there.”

“I would have paid to see you try to get gas, extra points if it was done in New Mexico,” Dave said with a nod.

“Gas?” Two of the trolls asked in unison.

“Fuel.” Rose tried another word. The trolls nodded but still looked lost. “What makes your ship go.”

“Oh, oh my, I hope we wouldn’t have to pick up another Captor.” The troll with a broken horn said with a little smile, as if that was enough to tell you he was joking.

“Your ship runs on trolls?”

“No, just Mr Spit and Lisp.”

“That’s almost complicated. Tho we’re not going to talk about it.”

“Where was your final destination?” The trolls shrugged. “Ah, I see, just on the run then. For the record, when the doorbell rings do your best to stay hidden. I don’t feel like having to gouge out another person’s eyes. It would waste time before dinner.”

“Understandable,” the male troll with fins said. “Nothing worse than when someone stands in the way of you and your food.” The humans didn’t know if he was being serious or not.

They didn’t chat a whole lot more, before the doorbell rang and the trolls moved out of the line of sight of the front door. Rose walked to it, calm and collected, which is more than she could say for John, who seemed to be giggling at random intervals. Rose could only assume that the aliens were the cause.

“Good evening,” she said once the door had opened.

“Got a delivery for the Lalondes?”

“You have come to the right address.”

“Okay, that makes forty assorted extra-large pizzas, five bottles of soda, twenty tubs of ice cream…” He looked up and jumped. “Whoa what the fuck is that?!”
“Sorry, the wizard statues tend to surprise people like that.”

“Not the statue!”

Rose turned just in time to see Nepeta’s head disappearing back behind the door. She looked back at the delivery boy and smiled winningly. “Excuse my friend, she was trying on a Halloween costume.”

“In the middle of summer?”

Rose sighed and held out another wad of bills. “Here is some money. Is this enough to forestall further questions?”

“Yes ma’am!”

The kids gathered the food and tottered into the hall under its weight, and Rose firmly shut the door behind them. She smirked. “I love doing that.”

The food was divided up within seconds, the trolls grabbing a handful of boxes each and settling on the couches or floor, sniffing curiously at the food, and digging in. The humans had to move fast to get their own boxes before everything was gone, and were simultaneously impressed and sickened by the trolls’ gusto. Bec sniffed at Kanaya’s, and the troll hissed in a manner most inappropriate to her usual ladylike manner. Her fangs were impressive, but as she only seemed interested in using them on the pizza, the humans relaxed quickly.

Jade took a bite of her vegetable pizza, and the pace of her chewing slowly decreased as she realised every troll was watching in fascination. “What?”

“So you really are a vegetarian?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Hehehe. I always wanted a veggie friend,” Terezi snickered.

“On Alternia it is considered taboo to eat nothing but flora,” Aradia explained. “It is seen as a sign of weakness.” Equius looked away awkwardly.

Eridan stared at the pizza. “Hawve you tried, you knoww, not being a wegetarian?”

“Okay, being culturally sensitive is one thing, but this is my planet, I’m not eating meat to please you! I don’t like the way animals are treated and all the hormones and other junk we put in them, it’s just gross.”

Gamzee licked cheese off the roof of his mouth and piped up. “That’s why we eat grubs more than beasts. Better for you.”

John blinked and said “Wait, didn’t you say baby trolls are called grubs-”

“Changing the subject...!” Karkat said quickly, catching the disturbed expressions on the humans’ faces.

“Why? Grubs are delicious!”

“Still changing the subject. How does everyone feel about... fuck, I don’t know. Dinner?”

“Be better if it was grubs.”
“You are not fucking helping, Gamzee.”

“Is Equius blushing?”

“... No. No, I’m not. Excuse me a moment.” Equius decaptchalogued a towel and mopped at his face, avoiding Vriska’s curious glance. Nepeta took the opportunity to grab some anchovies from his pizza, placing a finger to her lips for silence as the others snickered, and winked at him when he looked back down. He winked back, making sure nobody saw, and picked off some more fish.

“Your highness, would you like to try these?”

“Oh, thank you Equius...” Fefere took a few of the fish from the cardboard. “Oh wow, these are good.”

“They taste different than the ones on Alternia.”

“I guess they do somewhat, a little saltier?”

“Would you care for them? I must admit, they do not suit my particular palate.”

“Are you sure, Equius?”

“Quite sure, It’s a bit unfortunate, but if I am not going to eat them it would not be... good to waste the food.”

Fefere took the pieces of fish and set them in a neat pile on the side of her plate, as she finished up the slice of pizza she was eating. “Thank you, very much Equius.”

“It is my pleasure.”

Jade sighed and shook her head. “Rose, are you seriously eating pizza with a knife and fork?”

“Why not? Mother raised me to always be conscious of good manners,” Rose replied, delicately mopping at her lips with a napkin. She glanced around the room; Vriska was shovelling pizza into her mouth with both hands, Gamzee was crouching around the box he’d claimed like a hyena at a kill and glaring at the others as if he expected them to steal it, Nepeta was eating slices of pizza impaled on her claws like giant kebabs, Terezi’s freakishly long tongue was scooping up the last dregs from a tub of cherry ice cream, Sollux had been talking with his mouth full and sprayed most of the carpet. “Evidently the trolls were not so fortunate.”

“Oh, can it, human, we were wasting away to nothing!” Vriska said through a mouthful of pepperoni. “Been awhile since we had a good meal.”

“You will, I assume, assist in cleaning this up. It’s not polite to make one’s hosts tidy up after one.”

Vriska held up a finger. “Shoosh, human. No talking now, only eating.” She gulped down another slice, ignoring Rose’s disapproving look.

Karkat chewed thoughtfully, looking up at Rose. “Hm. Thish-” he swallowed, “this is weird. Everything’s going our way for once. I don’t suppose our luck’s held enough for you to have twelve spare recuperacos just lying around?”

“What’s a recuperacoon?” Jade asked.

Karkat blinked, shrugged, and muttered “Oh well, guess we really can’t have everything.”

“Yeah, thankh for not thtealing all the luck, Vrithka!”
“Recuperacoons are the things we sleep in,” Aradia explained. “Large cocoons full of slime. Where do humans sleep?”

“On beds, of course,” John said. He was surprised by the trolls’ reaction; some of them blushed, others gasped, and Vriska and Terezi snickered uncontrollably. “What? What’s with the awkward?”

“Uh, that … that don’t sound safe,” Gamzee said, twiddling his claws.

“Yeah, ithn’t that a bit prethumptuouth?” Sollux asked, blinking.

“What? It’s a bed, you get tired, lie down on it, and go to sleep,” Dave said, raising an eyebrow. “Pretty normal stuff."

“I think we may be having another miscommunication,” Equius broke in. “Among trolls, the bed, or ‘concupiscent couch’ in lowblood vernacular, is used exclusively for … something else.”

“He means sex,” Terezi announced helpfully.

Equius slapped his forehead and groaned “Thank you, I think they might have figured that out themselves.”

“Oh, well, there’s nothin’ to worry about there,” Dave said, waving airily. “Humans reproduce by releasing clouds of spores. Seriously, you go outside during sporing season and the sun’s blocked out by all the stuff, it’s like pitch-dark in midsummer, and don’t get me started on when they grow, you find babies sprouting up all over the place like fuckin’ fat pink screaming mushrooms.”

Karkat’s brow wrinkled. “Really?”

“No,” John said. “Dave’s so full of crap he cries brown tears, seriously, don’t listen to him.”

Equius looked unwell. “Please tell me you meant that metaphorically. I really wouldn’t want to know about that difference in our anatomies.”

“Hey!” Dave poked John in the ribs. “Coolkids do not cry any colour.”

“Davey, stop confusing the poor alinens,” Dr Lalonde said, gesturing in his direction with her glass.

“Before this conversation gets any more bizarre, I’ll point out that merely being on a bed is not an invitation to be joined in human society, and that if any of you get any funny ideas I sleep with a pair of sharpened knitting needles under my pillow.” Rose put aside her plate and reached for the strawberry ice cream as if she hadn’t just threatened her guests’ lives. She missed the look and the odd growling sound Vriska and Eridan exchanged.

Equius cleared his throat. “I don’t think you’ll run into any problem, I would make sure none of them had any ideas.” He glanced over to Eridan and Vriska. “It would be very distasteful for any of us to act beyond our level. Especially, since we are guests of someone so charitable and willing to help… Forgive me, your language is difficult to navigate through sometimes.”

“You are doing very well, given the state of your pronunciation when we first met you,” Rose said with a little smile.

“You are too kind… Miss Rose.”

“Rose, if the alien flirts with you any more, I’m pretty sure I’m going to puke. Horse-alien-troll, stop trying to get into her concupiscent couch, without even buying her dinner first. That’s how we do
things here, you buy the girl dinner, take her to a movie, and then you ask to crawl onto her couch.”

Equius looked down his nose at Dave and said “Be silent in front of your betters, mutant.”

There was a silence, then a thud. Dave’s fist stayed in place where it had landed against Equius’ chest. The troll looked down at it, unfazed. A thin whine emerged from Dave’s throat, turning into the word “owwwww”.

Jade pulled Dave’s hand away and looked at it. “Um. Wow, I think it’s broken.”

“Geez!” Dave gasped. “I thought trolls only turned to stone out in daylight…”

“Equius!” Nepeta hollered at him. “That was uncalled fur! You should have at least dodged when he tried to hit you. You know that you can hurt people like that!”

“He should know his place. If he wanted to try to engage me in a fight, he should have done something a little better than giving me a tap.”

“Equius,” Gamzee piped up. “Didn’t we just all and get away from that hemohierarchy? I don’t know how I be feeling about you yelling at mutants. Telling them to up and keep their place. We know how well it went last time you told someone to up and do that.”

Equius shifted and crossed his arms. “He still shouldn’t be disrespectful to his betters. Van-Karkat at least manages to be respectful, most times... I’ve come to expect that of them.”

“I’m not a mutant.” Dave was doing what the trolls could only assume was the human equivalent of growling. “There are a lot of things I am, but I am not a mutant.”

“But your eyes,” Terezi said suddenly. “I don’t mind, I like red. But your eyes give you away.”

“The polite term for the condition is ‘albinism’, ” Rose said, frowning slightly. “I’d appreciate you not insulting my cousin while you’re guests in my mother’s house.”

“Albinism?” The trolls repeated slowly. Terezi cleared her throat. “I don’t know what that is, we just call zero-degrees--”

“Shut up,” Karkat said. “If they have a term for it they’ve probably come to terms with it not being a bad thing. News flash, it isn’t. I might be a little hot headed, but I’m a troll like any of you too. So can we not throw around those words? I know I’m sick of hearing them.”

“Wait, what?” Jade looked at them, then to Dave. “You are also, I mean, you also have albinism? You look just like your friends though. I’m not saying you don’t. I’m just curious. I know it happens in the animal kingdom, but I didn’t know it could happen with aliens.”

“I don’t know exactly what causes it.” Karkat said with a shrug. His voice becoming progressively softer. “It’s rare though, only thing rarer is limebloods, but thats because they’re extinct. Well they were, I mean, on Alternia they are extinct. Kanaya’s pretty rare too, that also borders on being a mutation, but it’s not.” He scratched the back of his head. “Sorry for being rude, it’s just on Alternia... People, or trolls, I guess, who are different tend to get shunned. Especially if they try to outreach their place.”

“What’s different about Kanaya?...” John squinted. “Wait, are you talking about your eye colours? Ah, I get it. So, Karkat, if you’re albino do you dye your hair?” He caught Dave’s scowl. “Come on, Dave, we all know you do and it’s not like aliens are going to care.”
“My hair? What? No, troll hair is always black, why would our blood colour affect that?” Karkat looked at Dave. “Why, what does it do in humans?”

Dr Lalonde blinked. “Blood colour?”

“Well, duh,” Vriska said rolling her eyes. “What did you think we were talking about? Dave’s obviously at the zero degree mark. Just like our fearless leader. Jade’s at the 120 mark, which is extinct on Alternia, John is with me or Equius, somewhere between 210 and 240. And Rose is at the 270 mark with Gamzee. Though hopefully she’s a bit more stable. Unless you’re crossing into seadweller colors, but you don’t look like a seadweller.”

“You.. Your eyes...” Jade said slowly, before she laughed. “We don’t have blood colors, we have blood color. It’s not nice to mess with us either.”

“We would never make light of our blood colors. They are the definition of our lives and des--”

“Equius, shut up. Kanaya, is his hand really broken?” Kanaya moved over to Dave and took his hand in hers. “We aren’t kidding. On Alternia your rank in society is determined by blood color. Aradia being the lowest and Feferi being the highest. We cover the whole spectrum, minus limebloods. But as I said they are extinct. I’m a... red blood. Mine isn’t supposed to exist and isn’t covered on the spectrum. So, I’ve been a pariah most of my life, because of it. For some reason these douchenozzles, even Equius and his hemocasting, are excluded from treating me like a... mutant.”

“Wait, you all bleed different colors?”

“No shit, what else would happen?” Vriska suddenly looked excited. “Seriously, do you get your blood color in your hair? Eridan does, it’s one of the few things I can stand on him. I want cerulean in my hair.”

“Thpeak for yourthelf, VK, I don’t want anymore yellow then I have to wear. Rather have red or blue, but that’d get me killed for prominently dithplaying a color that ithn’t mine.”

“All of you hush.” Kanaya said. “It appears as if he doesn’t know how to punch, so one of his fingers is broken. However, the force seems to have jammed his wrist. You are very lucky, Dave, not many trolls who punch Equius get out with so few injuries. Let alone if he retaliates.”

“Uh, guys, the blood thing...?” John said hesitantly. “It doesn’t actually work that way for us.”

“Yeah, ‘albino’ doesn’t really mean red eyes,” Dave said, wincing as Kanaya bandaged his hand. “Just means I don’t have any pigment at all. I’m too awesome to need it. Cool as a fucking polar bear, that’s me. My hair is naturally white, I just like it better with some colour.” He fluffed his blond hair with his unbroken hand.

“Excuse me?” Equius said. He stiffened up. “You mean to say you don’t have blood colors? Just one, correct? Or am I mishearing you?”

“No, that’s what they, uhh, said.” Tavros looked at the humans, slightly confused.

“How do they know where other humans rank in association to them? They must have some other form of branding. I-I..”

“Guys, the humans broke Equ. Someone sit him down and make him calm down before he freaks out that humans are different than us.” Eridan managed a little smile. “So, you guys can lack pigment, like our lusii can. That’s actually pretty cool, I’ve newer seen a troll like that. Hawe you, Wris?”
“I don’t think they’d make it out of the brooding caverns, but it would be awesome. A white troll, with white blood? I’m sure the lusii would just think it was a baby lusus too. I’ve seen a lot of trolls but never that.”

“No, our blood’s not white. It’s coloured by haemoglobin - that’s how it works. I’m sure Mother will want to hear all about how yours works, but maybe that’s better saved for tomorrow when we’re more awake.”

“So what colour do you little monkeys bleed?”

“Oh yeah, because a giant tattooed space monster asking that isn’t creepy at all,” Dave muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

“I can show you what we mean.” Gamzee lifted a claw to his hand and cut a little bit of the skin enough that he was bleeding. “I’m a purpleblooded motherfucker, our eyes are a good indicator. Except the fishesister’s, her color is still coming in. I just wanted to know what you do bleed. If it ain’t white, is it some other color?” The other trolls in the room followed suit, and each of them showed the humans a little cut with a rainbow of different colors. All but Karkat, who was shaking his head.

“That’s not about to happen over here, and you’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Can I do something real quick?” Dave looked at the other humans, who just shrugged. “Aradia, right?” Aradia nodded. “Stand right here.” Dave went through and lined them up. “We have a rainbow of aliens. You know like a school of fish, or a murder of crows. This is a rainbow of aliens. All but Karkat who gets to be the black little raincloud who floated by first.”

“For not having a hemospectrum you do seem to understand how it works,” Feferi said softly. “This is basically our ranking in the system. Aradia is the lowest point, at about 10 to 20 degrees. With me at the highest.”

“We just call that a rainbow, it appears after storms when sunlight hits the water droplets.” John said with a shrug.

“We have those too,” Karkat pointed out. "Light doesn’t work differently on our planet, numbfronds. We don’t really get to see them much outside photographs, though - daylight is a requirement for rainbows and they’re not worth burning to death.”

“Heh, I see. But we can answer your question now, even if it is a little weird. Umm, except we can’t exactly show you...”

“Our nails aren’t really sharp enough to do what you did,” said Rose, showing off her perfectly manicured hands. “But, as a gesture of goodwill to the intergalactic community... are your claws toxic? No? Good.”

She took Kanaya’s hand gently, and pressed her finger against the claw tip. The trolls watched as the blood welled up in a dark droplet. Rose raised her other hand, and smeared the blood across her palm for better viewing, then sucked her nicked finger.

Karkat stared at them, and all the other trolls looked at the blood on her hand, Terezi coming close with a smile on her face. “That smells delicious!” The humans cringed.

Vriska pushed her out of the way. “You’re not a rainbowdrinker, stop it. So you all bleed red then?”
John nodded. “I could show you, but Rose’s blood color is the same as all of ours. It would get pretty boring if we all showed you.”

“Well, according to the hemospectrum all of you are mutants. But obviously you don’t have one so you don’t have to worry about it.” Vriska smiled at John. “Now Karkat doesn’t have to be so afraid.”

“I was not afraid! I just don’t like showing off my blood to anyone who asks. Forgive me for living most of my life having to hide it, and every trace of it. I couldn’t get by with just being a maroon blood, and I’m used to hiding it. Forgive me if the habits hard to lose.”

“I’m going to stop you there, Little Suffering.” Vriska said. Karkat rolled his eyes. “Karkat’s the same color as all of you. So we weren’t far off calling you that, Dave, but when I call you a mutant I mean it affectionately, just like when I call Karkat one.” Karkat snorted in laughter.

“So, do you have some other type of system to show social order? If not blood, do you do it by eye color? or hair color, or somethin?” The humans shook their heads.

“Well, they sort of used to do it by skin colour, but that’s really, really, really not allowed these days,” John added. “So for the sake of simplicity, let’s just go with no, we don’t.”

Equius looked at Rose and Dr Lalonde, disappointedly. “So you aren’t actually royalty?” The news was obviously just hitting him.

“No, I’m afraid we’re not, just average people.”

“But, your hive, and the amount of food you have...” Equius said slowly. “This type of opulence is reserved for the highest echelons of society.”

“Welcome to capitalism,” Rose said with a smile. “Mother and her associate Professor Harley are inventors and shrewd businesspeople. To put it as simply as possible, they invented something useful, then sold a lot of it. So no, entertaining as it is to be mistaken for a princess, my blood only relates to the family fortune in that it’s carrying genes for talent. Hopefully - I haven’t really had a chance to test mine yet.”

“Oh, I see. Pardon my presumption, it’s just that...”

“No, no,” Jade said quickly. “It’s totally understandable, it was a cultural difference. I’ve traveled enough to understand that cultures are different. It would be mean and unfair to think all of you know exactly how Earth culture is. If we do anything that’s against your culture we don’t intend it either. This is like the ultimate lesson in diversity. The US and Mexico are extremely different when it comes to things. I can’t imagine Earth to Alternia. That’s the name of your planet, right?”

“One of them. But yeah, it’s our main planet. It’s where all of us were hatched.”

“I don’t know about the other four humans in the room, but I think this is awesome. I wish I could put stuff together for it. Like a lecture or something. I’m sure Dr Lalonde will cover the science end of it, I’m pretty interested in how you all live.” Jade realized how her words might sound and covered her mouth. “Oh geez, I’m so sorry, I don’t mean to treat you guys like something to be watched and monitored. It’s just interesting to me... Sorry.”

“Well, if we get to hear about you in exchange...” Feferi said thoughtfully. “I have to say I’m interested to hear about Earth. We’re not sure how long we’ll be here, but I guess we can talk to you while we are here.”
“I think that’s a fair trade!” Jade said, smiling.

“I am very interested in hearing how you organize your government,” Feferi said softly, afraid to ask too many questions, lest it be something offensive. “I am always looking for more ways government works.”

“Perhaps,” Rose interjected. “We can save it for the morning, once all of us have had time to settle from this very interesting and eye-opening evening.”

“Oh, that’s quite alright, we wouldn’t want to impose... We should head back to the ship anyway,” Feferi said, smiling slightly. “We can meet up later.”

The humans all looked at each other. “There might have been a little miscommunication, you’re free to stay here. What I mean by that is stay the night, and any night you want to stay. It would be far more comfortable than the forest or your ship. Also, so no one else stumbles on to you. It might not turn out well if they do.”

“Not that we don’t think you guys couldn’t defend yourselves,” Dave added, looking at his hand. “But we meant stay here.”

“Oh... Well,” Feferi said looking at the other trolls. “In that case where would you like to store us?”

“St-Store you?” The humans laughed, all of them feeling a little bad about it, but they couldn’t help it.

“I don’t understand,” Feferi said slowly.

“Store is not the proper word. Unless you’re a box of things or produce. It’s not a bad thing, just you misused a word and the image it created for us was funny,” John said, stifling his laughter. “You’d say, ‘where would we be staying?’ or ‘where would you like us to sleep?’ That would be better than ‘store us’.”

“Oh, oh, I see,” Feferi said nodding. “Then, where would you like us to stay?”

“Good question,” Rose said thoughtfully. “We don’t have twelve spare bedrooms... Since we don’t have cocoons, what kind of sleeping conditions would you prefer we set up? I think we can gather some pillows and blankets and so on, though I’m not sure we have enough for twelve.”

“Ten,” Feferi said. “Eridan and I might do better in water, if you have anywhere we can use.”

“My bathtub’s free,” John volunteered. “Rose, you willing to sacrifice yours for the cause?” Rose nodded.

“The rest of us can sleep on the couches - or do you have anywhere that’s more out of sunlight?”

“They could have the bashment. We can cover up the windowsh.”

“Thank you for the suggestion, mother. I can show you all to the basement, we might have to gather some other items of comfort for you to sleep on. But I do think we have extra pillows and such.”

“We have some in our own stores,” Terezi said. “But having some more would be great. Better than sleeping on a metal floor. I’m sure all of us would appreciate it.”

“That is, if it is not too much of a hassle. We do not wish to put any of you in any kind of trouble over us.”
“Dude, it’s no trouble!” John said. “We’d go to a lot more effort to be the first people ever to help out aliens.”

“Well, in that case...” Feferi and Karkat took turns to shake hands with each human. “Thank you all very much for your help. Oh, this is so exciting!” Feferi’s squeal nearly shattered the windows. Gamzee cringed, but everyone assumed it was due purely to her volume. “We get to introduce a whole new species to the intergalactic community!”

“I do not know if it is a good thing or not,” Kanaya said, wiggling her finger in her ear. “Feferi, also, keep your volume down. We’re this close.” Kanaya finished by showing her fingers only the tiniest bit apart.

“Oh sorry, it’s just exciting. How often do you meet aliens who don’t know about other aliens?” She quickly added in Alternian: “Or know about our Empire’s deeds. I don’t think they’d help us if they knew what Alternia actually does.”

“Good point,” Kanaya responded in kind, before clearing her throat. “Thank you all. It truly means a lot to us. We did not expect the sentient species on this planet to be so kind, or helpful.”

“Aww, thank you sho mush,” Dr Lalonde slurred, blushing. “Now, kiddies, time for bed!”

“But it’s barely midnight!” Terezi protested.

“Humans sleep during the night, not the day,” Rose said.

“Well, that’s inconvenient.”

Karkat poked her gently. “Stop complaining, the deal here’s a lot better than we thought it could ever be. A bit of schedule adjustment is a small price. We can go set up in the basement now and talk more when the humans wake up.”
Chapter 31

The humans left after handing the trolls the final few pillows and blankets they could find, and the trolls started to put together little sleeping areas for each of themselves in the basement, trying to create as comfortable a pile as they could manage. It was like their hike to the caves on Alternia, they created a circle around a general middle ground. Since they were nocturnal, Sollux had gotten an overview on how the house’s security system worked, and a few of the team had gone back to the ship to gather what remained of their supplies. All of them were reeling over the evening’s events, trying to make sense of the humans. Or the planet for that matter. The few things they knew about it didn’t seem to align, and the fact that the drones had been destroyed seemed unsettling. Still, they couldn’t judge this too harshly.

When the few that went to the ship had returned safely, they finished up creating their sleeping areas. There was a heavy silence hanging around all of them. It was Feferi who finally broke it.

“Can we all talk?” Her voice was unsteady. No one blamed her. They were all nervous.

“I think,” Karkat said, “Feferi is right, we should really talk.” Every troll in the room sat in front of their piles and looked at each other. “Before we get too into discussing the humans, let me ask a few questions. Sollux, Equius, do you think we could get the ship up and running again? If so, in how long?”

“It may be possible, it would depend on the technology and parts this planet has to offer. If they do not have all the appropriate parts we might have to fabricate them from existing pieces, which would make it take longer. Though we should be able to manage something.”

“It would fly. It would just take a while. The electronics still work, short of. I’m going to work on getting those up first so we can track the fleet.”

“Alright, do you guys have a general estimate of how long?”

“A few months, it depends on many factors. Though perhaps the humans would be kind enough to gather us supplies, I’m sure we can find something to give them in trade. If we don’t want to travel down that path, there has to be a way one of us could find the items and get them.”

“Alright, so first mission in general is to get the ship working enough we can track the fleet.” Karkat said counting it on his fingers. “Second thing, this doesn’t change some of our schedules. The fleet is still coming, and there is no guarantee that we can be moving on this ship before they show up. We still need to train.” The trolls around the room nodded. “Finally, the humans.”

“Ah yes,” Kanaya said. “They are an odd species aren’t they? They seemed thrilled to meet us, a bit frightened but quite excited to see us.”

“That can’t be a good sign.” Karkat’s eyes darted back and forth, checking that the exit door was still present. “Maybe our best option is to leave as soon as possible. Fill up the ship and run.”

“If we do end up leaving, can we take the Egbert human with us?” Eridan asked hopefully.

Tavros sighed. “Oh dear. Rebound.”

“C’mon, he needs a savvy protector, how’s he gonna survive without us? He wwas dumb
enough to believe Nep’s fake crying!”


“I know I fall for it, I just hate seeing her sad.” Eridan pouted. “But he doesn’t knoww us, we could have easily killed him!”

“That’s true, maybe they lack a lot of survival skills?”

“Or perhaps,” Kanaya interjected, “they are a kind species, and they would like to help.”

“Have you ever heard of that before?” Vriska said. “In all of the species our race has met, how many of them haven’t had an ulterior motive?”

“How many of them have our species not been trying to enslave or exterminate?” Feferi pointed out. “Maybe they’d all have really been nice if we hadn’t attacked them!”

“What are you trying to do, suffocate us mercifully under the weight of your optimism before they kill us?” Karkat shook his head. “Seriously, even if they don’t plan to eat our brains, this is not an appropriate culture for us to be hanging around in. Come on, a species so sex-crazed that they regularly fall asleep on their beds?” He glanced over at Gamzee and Eridan. “Not a good environment for some of us, I think.”

“Hey, it can’t be all bad,” Vriska said. “They get a lusus and an ancestor?”

“Yes, well, from our point of view that just means more things that could potentially attack us. Did you see that beast’s teeth?”

“Actually, I think we should stay,” Gamzee said unexpectedly. “Come on, we find this little planet, we’re taken in and fed, and it turns out everyone here carries Karbro’s sacred colour in their veins. It’s-”

“If you say it’s a miracle so help me I will punch you. I do not need to be reminded that Belsai would have creamed his stupid robe over this place.”

“Forget miracles, this is motherfucking fate!” Gamzee’s smile faded and he sagged slightly. “Though maybe we shouldn’t be staying right in this hive. Not too sure what the spacemonkeys have planned.” He looked at his scarred hands. “Not like, you know, that. I don’t reckon mammals would want us for… pailing. But…”

“Science experiment? Or maybe they have some other weird use for aliens. Like it’s Earthian policy if they find aliens they lure them in for something?”

“Like what? A game?” Vriska rolled her eye. “If that’s the case we’ll be pretty well off. The John one hugged Nepeta without a second thought. He offered it.”

“That could be part of their tactics,” Terezi said grimly. “Why are they being so friendly? It’s a pretty good question. I almost can’t believe it was Gamzee who thought of it.”

“My pan ain’t rotted enough not to be in the know of when I should be worried. Something that seems too good to be true always is. But at the same time… We should stay but be cautious until we understand what they want better. I think that ain’t too much of a raw trade.”

“Well, worst comes to worst there’s five of them and twelve of us, right?” Terezi said, toying with her cane.
“Eleven, soon.” Everyone looked at Equius, who swallowed nervously and lifted the hem of his undershirt. The skin was starting to split, exposing the opening of a silk gland. “My strength will be no use to us when I cocoon, and I can’t hold it off forever.”

“We’ll make it work,” Karkat said. “We always do. We don’t have much in the way of other options anyway. Though if we’re going to leave we need to do it before you are unresponsive. I don’t think even with our combined strength and Aradia and Sollux’s psychic powers we can move your cocoon… Safely, that is. We could just fling you around, but that might damage something. I don’t really understand how our pupation works - no, this is not me asking anyone to explain it. But I don’t want any of us more injured than we already are.”

“We will figure it out,” Equius said. “It could be an option that when it comes I go to the ship and set up there.”

“I think that might be our best option, though we might have to lose two of us then. Someone needs to protect your cocoon,” Karkat said, leaning his chin on his fist. “Which means Nepeta and you would be gone for however long it’s going to take.”

“Mine wasn’t too long,” Vriska said. “Maybe his won’t be.”

“The higher on the spectrum you get the longer it will take. Until you get to the seadwellers, they are different,” Kanaya explained. “For all we know Equius’ pupation could take a month. Let alone if Gamzee goes into it… I apologise.”

“No, you’re right. Bluebloods ain’t as big as purplebloods, but they ain’t tiny either. It could take a lot of time. I don’t think I am close, I don’t got any of the signs. Even if I was, it would be delayed some for my health to get itself back.”

“If anyone who hasn’t starts sensing it, let us know. Equius, keep us posted. We’ll have to make that decision when it’s more imminent. We just got here, and we don’t have all the information.”

“It would be good to talk with them and get a handle before we make a useless plan,” Terezi said. “We can’t waste our resources and time is our most precious resource. We still need to keep training for Feferi to beat the Empress.”

“The fleet,” Sollux corrected her. “The whole fleet, all of uth need to train. We have to get really fucking good at fighting. And thoon, or all of uth are doomed.”

“Equius and I can give a feww training techniques from the fleet to all of you. Wwhile he’s still conscious, it wwould eeven the playing field. I don’t knoww howw much you learned, Gam… But maybe, if you know anything, you can too.”

“That sound agreeable.” Equius nodded. “All of us training would be wise as well.”

“I can give you all what I learned, couldn’t write books on it, but I did learn some.”

“Okay, tho we train hard, gather thupplieth, and watch the humanth. If puthh comes to thhove we’re ready to go.”

Nepeta pulled out her claws. “No time like the present, eh?”

~~~

John had only just started to drift off when clashing metal and shouting from outside woke him. He fell out of bed, grabbed his glasses, and looked for the fire; there was none, and the noise seemed to
be coming from the front of the house, which he couldn’t see from his window. He ran out, bumping into Dave and Dr Lalonde on the stairs, and hurried outside, to find the trolls standing in a circle, pumping their fists, and chanting something.

The humans stared for a long moment, trying to make sense of the scene. Whatever they were chanting sounded weird; not scary or evil, just odd. There were two trolls in the center. John wasn’t quite sure which two, he hadn’t gotten a handle on all their names. He was sure the longer he was around them the sooner he could pick up the difference between the trolls beyond their differently shaped horns.

He thought the one in the red skirt was Kanaya, she had the most different style of clothes from the others. He wasn’t too sure about the other one. All of the trolls dressed similarly, and the second troll was no exception. The only difference was she was wearing a coat over her black shirt.

The chanting went quiet, and John could make out sound from the troll whose name he had doubts on. Then Kanaya returned some noises, though they sounded different. It took John a moment to realize they were speaking in their mother tongue. Or perhaps they were just making noises at each other.

There were more words exchanged, before there was silence, and both Kanaya and the other troll (maybe it was Vriska? Or maybe it was Aradia, John still wasn’t sure) had something in their hands. Vriska slammed an 8-ball down on the ground, and recovered what appeared to be a few dice. He couldn’t see what was in Kanaya’s hand at first, but then she flicked her wrist and he caught sight of it.

“Is that a lipstick…?” he said to himself, confused, before there was a loud “vroom”, and suddenly Kanaya was holding a chainsaw.

Rose watched, spellbound. “Mother, I know what I want for Christmas.”

“What’s going on?” Jade said, sounding nervous, watching the other troll slam the dice down on the ground, and having something appear in her hand afterwards. As the blue glow faded, they realised it was a sword. “Are they going to kill each other?”

Terezi sniffed and looked up in the direction of the humans. “Hey, you’re just in time for our strife practice! Wanna watch? Or join in?”

“Strife practice?” John repeated, gaping.

Terezi smiled, looking over at their human hosts. “We’ve been cooped up in a small ship for what feels like ages, we need to stretch our muscles and get a good fight in. Vriska and Kanaya volunteered to be the first, all of us will have a chance to deliver… or practice delivering justice.”

“I see,” John said, looking toward the group. “Why are you fighting, though, couldn’t you go for a jog or something?”

“Fighting,” Aradia said, “not only works muscle groups that other types of motion do not. But also, we are behind on our practice. We have an Empire to defeat, and to do so we must be in the best physical shape of our lives. When the inevitable happens, we must be ready.”

“I’m sorry, go back to the ‘Empire to defeat’ part?” Jade said, shaking her head and laughing nervously. “You mean you’re going to go back to your planet, right?”

“Um,” Karkat said, rubbing his neck and looking at the ground.
“Returning to our home planet would do little to defeat the Empire, seeing as the vast majority of our species is spacebound. It would be more advantageous to do it on another planet where they don’t have an advantage. We all know Alternia, doing it on another planet with enough time for us to get a lay of the land would give us a significant advantage.”

“So, long story short, they are coming here?”

“Yes.”

Jade went pale and staggered backwards a little. “Okay. This is a little more than we were expecting.”

“Wait, where did Dave go-”

A thumping beat poured out of the upstairs window, and they looked up to see Dave waving, his laptop on the windowsill and its speakers blaring rave music. The other humans were pretty sure that he plugged them into the stereo that he had in his room as well. Rose had never been happier that they lived so far from other people.

“What the fuck are you doing?” John shouted up.

“Hey, they wanna set up the extraterrestrial Fight Club, they need some sick beats to keep in time, right?”

“This isn’t exactly helping! They are saying that more aliens are going to come and try to take over Earth.”

“Not take over Earth,” Aradia said, her smile still serene. “Just kill us and whoever gets in their way. This planet is basically useless to the Empire… Then again they might take it over on principle.”

“I’m so glad you told us this before we invited you into our home,” Rose said sardonically. “Very thoughtful of you.”

Eridan frowned. “Wwell, if we had, you’d hawe said no!”

“I don’t know about that, but, it would have been good to know.” Rose sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose, before looking back to the fight.

Kanaya and Vriska were still meeting blades to chainsaw. The humans had never seen a fight like this, and were curious; no doubt there were rules. Modern human warfare shied away from being so close, and even martial art types didn’t look like this. Even though they said they wouldn’t kill, it certainly looked like they were trying.

“Wait, if you have the technology for space travel, why do you still use swords?” Jade asked.

“Wouldn’t guns be... okay, ‘safer’ is the wrong word, but you get my meaning?”

Gamzee looked away from the fight, eyes and fangs gleaming. “Guns are for hunting, not war! You’d deny yourself the feeling of your enemies’ motherfucking blood between your claws?” The humans recoiled a bit at his statement; they had thought he was creepy before, but that pretty much cemented the idea.

Karkat shook his head and looked over to the humans. He looked just as enraptured with the thought. “Guns are for cowards. Sure, you could kill quite a few trolls with them, but the distance makes it impersonal, it doesn’t make your kills your own. Most trolls look at it that way, you get the odd one who thinks guns are the be all and end all.” He pointed over at Eridan. “But most of them
are colderbloods. Warmbloods and purplebloods, especially them, would never deny themselves the thrill of killing up close and personal.”

“That’s really creepy.”

“Don’t forget,” Aradia said, her eyes still fixed on the fight, “warfare, fighting, bloodshed, etcetera are a way of life for us. Our sports are physically violent, our whole lives we prepare to join the fleet, or army, I suppose in your terms. We have specific battle rituals, and many thoughts on how it should be conducted. What we see as cowardly other species might see as wise. We look at warfare in the sense that if you’re not in some moderate amount of danger what’s the fun?”

“‘Fun’,” John repeated disbelievingly. “Uh, well, humans don’t think getting killed is fun, so how long do we have before these psycho aliens show up? I want to know how long I can safely spend panicking before we have to do something.”

“It’s short of up in the air,” Sollux sighed. “Depending if they use the wormhole or not. And other factorth, but we did get a pretty good headthtart. I have thomeone looking into it.”

“That’s helpful. So they could be here tomorrow?”

“Nah, they’re not in the system yet,” Terezi said, looking away from the strife. “We monitor for them, we’ll let you know when they get to the solar system.”

“Wonderful, then I have a countdown to the final days.”

“Hey John, this wouldn’t be the first apocalypse we survived. How many end of days have come and gone and we’re all still breathing and fine?”

“Aliens aren’t exactly poorly read prophecies, or miscalculations of dates.” John sighed.

“Hell of a lot cooler, though!” Dave yelled from the window. “If I’m going to die, this is how I wanted it to be! Either aliens or rampaging catgirls.”

“Let’s not talk of death just yet, okay?” Jade said, raising a hand. “Maybe we can talk our way out of it. Right?”

The trolls burst into snickers, then stopped. Karkat blinked. “You’re serious? Uh, no. No, we can’t.”

“Yeah. See, we got something of theirs,” Gamzee said, looking at Feferi.

“Something of theirs, Feferi is owned by them?” John asked.

Gamzee let out a little snort of laughter. “Nah, see the fishsister is next in line for the throne, they have until her pupation to kill her or for her to kill the standing Empress.”

Feferi nodded. “Or all of our race will die. I ran off to learn how to fight and give myself a real chance at defeating her once and for all so I can take over as Empress.”

“So, you’re a runaway princess, who is running from an evil queen, who wants to kill you… Who is friends with every level of society… Tell me, do you talk to animals, or maybe just sing and they help you with housework?” Dave asked.

“Well, I did try to train some cuttlefish to clean my windows once. I thought they looked bored and might want something useful to do. Does that count?”

“Oh my god, this is precious.” Dave hadn’t lost the little lip-quirk which qualified as a smile for him.
“So, you’re practicing fighting, in order to take down this Empress,” Rose restated. “Do all of you get to do it, or is it just Feferi?”

“It’s supposed to just be me. But she’ll bring along the fleet or at least part of it, so we all need to be ready for a fight. A pretty epic one as well. There will be a lot of trolls to take down.”

Kanaya and Vriska both said something, and a moment later their weapons were put away. Both of them nodded at each other, before Vriska said something that sounded more like a chirp than a word.

“Oh shit,” she said shortly thereafter. “Humans. Hello.” The humans looked over Vriska; she had a nick in her robotic arm, and a quick glance over at Kanaya showed her wrapping a few bandages on some cuts. “I meant it.” Vriska turned slightly to look at the other trolls. “Next. We have to get the strifing shit down. How many of you want to end up as decoration on the floor? We fight or we die. Get your asses in there.”

Tavros nodded and stepped forward. He said something in their language, and the other trolls nodded. Terezi came forward and replied to him, they spoke, and a moment later Tavros had a lance in his hand and Terezi pulled a sword out of her cane.

“Mind if I ask you a question?” Vriska asked. John nodded. “My translator says strifing is the translation, but it’s also coming up with a bunch of other words, pummel, grief, beat. Are any of those right? Or is it really just strife?”

“They all work. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, never been better. I missed beating the meddling jadeblood.” Vriska had a smile. “Of course, it’s all friendly.”

“And we’re going to keep it that way,” said Karkat pointedly. The humans missed his glance in Gamzee’s direction.

~~~

John woke up, put on his glasses, glanced at the clock, and cursed quietly. Ten in the morning? Why the hell had he slept so late? … Images of grey-skinned creatures floated into his head, and he remembered waking up in the middle of the night. Must have been woken by that crazy dream. He yawned and stretched, stumbling into the ensuite bathroom and rubbing at his stubble, which was already uncomfortable over the course of one night. Curse his father’s genetic hairiness.

He blinked into the mirror for a second, before catching a glimpse of water in the bathtub out of the corner of his eye. Had he forgotten to pull the plug last night or something? He turned, saw what was lying in the tub, and screamed.

Eridan rocketed upright, screaming just as loudly, causing a tidal wave to slosh out of the tub and soak the carpet. Ahab’s Crosshairs were already in his arms; he swung the gun upwards and there was a sound like a direct lightning strike. John covered his head as plaster rained down.

“What the FUCK?!”

The sound of running feet in the corridor alerted them both to attention from the rest of the house. The bathroom door opened and all four of the other resident humans crowded round, followed by Feferi. Feferi, mercifully clothed, was holding a toothbrush in one hand and toothpaste in the other, and still brushing the left side of her hair with a brush held in the prehensile curls on the right side of her head. John noticed this, and his brain carefully disregarded it, unable to handle any more weirdness at once.
“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, ask the glubbin’ human. He just stormed in here and screamed.”

“Eridan!” Feferi nearly shrieked, her mouth still foamy from the tooth paste. “We don’t just shoot at the humans!”

“I didn’t shoot at him till he screamed at me. He screamed then I shot. I thought it was some type of beast or other creature. What do you think I am? Some inconsiderate jerk who doesn’t understand that they are being really nice to us?”

“I’ll withhold my comments about whether or not you’re an inconsiderate jerk. What happened then?”

“I told you he came in here and screamed. Worst fuckin’ alarm clock in the universe.”

“Sorry, sorry - wait, why am I the one apologising?” John blinked and rubbed his temples. “So many questions. Why are you sleeping in my bathtub? Why are you sleeping naked in my bathtub? Why are you sleeping holding a really big gun anywhere?”

“Answering in order,” Eridan said, scowling and tugging his eyepatch into place, “I like my gills to be wet when I sleep and you don’t have any sopor slime; I only have one set of clothes and I wanted to keep them dry; and the gun is in case some idiot very rudely barges in on me.” He punctuated the last clause of the sentence by jabbing the gun in John’s direction.

“Oh God, last night wasn’t a dream…” John looked up. “There’s a large smoking hole in my ceiling.”

“Yes there is.” Eridan looked up guiltily at Dr Lalonde. “Uh, sorry about that. I’ll fix it.”

Dr Lalonde tutted, sipping from the glass in her hand. “Thank you for the offer… Eridan, was it? In the future, please don’t play with guns in the house, okay?”

“Mom, are you drinking already?” groaned John.

Rose sighed as the group at the doorway turned to leave. “You get used to that.” She politely shut the door, leaving John alone with Eridan and still very confused.

Eridan climbed out of the bath, propped the gun against the wall, and grabbed a towel which, to John’s distress, he started to use on his hair instead of to cover himself. “Wow, you’re still freaking out.”

“What do you expect? I came in and found an alien sleeping naked with a gun in my bathtub!”

Eridan frowned, puzzled. “Humans wear clothes in the bath?”

“That’s not the- argh! Why are you still not getting dressed now you’re not in the tub?”


“Well, no, not really,” John said, gesturing to Eridan’s gillflaps.

“Not my fault your stupid planet has no seadwellers.”

“And, uh…” John’s eyes moved reluctantly downwards to check if he’d seen what he thought he
had seen. “I’ve only seen that on a boy once. Well, once in real life the time we went swimming, twice if you count the time Dave showed us that porn with the guy who looks like Cyrus Grissom.”

“Wwoww, are all humans this prudish?”

John picked up a towel and forced it into Eridan’s hands. “Geez, you’re cold. I don’t think lying in a tub of unheated water for hours can be good for you.”

Eridan blushed slightly. “Aww, it’s cute that you care, but no, I’m supposed to be cold. Not a mammal, remember?”

“Oh yeah. Well, uh, maybe you should talk to Dave.”

“Why?”

“Oh God…” John turned red and struggled to find words.

~~~

Getting dressed could be a trial on bad days, even without a broken hand. Still, things had become much better after the surgery he’d had over spring break. Dave proudly brushed a finger against the scars; they’d healed up nicely. His eyes skimmed briefly over another scar, shallower and much older, along his collarbone, but he didn’t dwell on it. Instead, he stepped into his pants and wriggled them up one-handed, then made an attempt to put his shirt on.

There was a knock at the door. “Hey, Strider human?”

“What?” Dave opened the door, broken hand still inside his shirt and trying to work into the sleeve, to find a very confused-looking Eridan. “I’m kind of busy here.”

“Egbert human said I should talk to you because I don’t hawe somefin called a penis. Is that important?”

Dave blinked, and glanced over at the packer lying on his bed. “No can do, fishbug, I only have the one.”

Eridan’s eye followed his, stared, then widened. “Oh cod, ewwww! Your bulges come off?”

“Well, mine does. It’s a rare talent.”

Eridan backed slowly out of the room.

~~~

“Uh, Tavros, was it? I can’t get through the hall with your wings in the way.”

“Oh! Um, sorry.” Tavros pressed against the wall, letting Jade past. “They are a bit, uh, inconvenient indoors.”

“It’s okay. Now come on, we need to make a shopping list- eek!”

As Jade reached the top of the stairs, Eridan backed into her as he left Dave’s room. Both of them stumbled, Eridan managed to right himself, and Jade fell forward down the staircase. Dave and John, alerted by the scream, ran to the landing, but were too far away to reach her.

“Whoa!” Tavros sprang forward after her, falling off-balance on his robot legs, and the crowd
gasped, expecting him to fall too.

Jade opened her eyes to find herself in Tavros’ arms, his wings fluttering and scraping the walls but holding him up a few inches above the top stair.

“Uhh, you should be, um, careful on stairs,” he mumbled, blushing.

“Wow.” Jade clutched her chest, feeling her pulse calm. “Thank you.”

After everyone was sure no one was going to tumble down the stairs and get any type of head injury, Dave sputtered out a laugh and looked at the troll and Jade. “Didn’t I warn you about the stairs?”

“I’m sorry, Dave.” Jade smiled, then continued giggling a little. “But it keeps happening.”

John snickered. “You told her, dog!”

“Seriously, fishbug, don’t walk backwards near the top of a staircase - how high do you have to be even to do something like that?” That set the humans off again, the trolls looking at each other in complete confusion.

Tavros shifted and pulled them back onto solid ground, setting Jade down carefully and making sure she wouldn’t fall again, before he let her go. He dropped his wings and tried to fold them to take up as little space as possible.

“Are you okay?” he asked again, looking a little bashful. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. Jade was sure if she kept silent any longer he’d start kicking his foot back and forth. She smiled at the image.

“Yeah, I’m alright, just had a little scare. Thanks for making sure I didn’t get hurt.”

“No, uhh, problem. Can I ask what your little interchange with the other humans was about? You all seemed to understand, was it a pop culture reference?”

“What, your planet’s not heard of me?” Dave said proudly. “That was only a reference to the greatest artwork of all time, and I am the creator. It’s me. Come on, I’ll show you.”

“You’re an artist?” Tavros said slowly. “That’s very, uhh, impressive. I would like to see your artwork, as long as I don’t become a part of it.” The way it was said made Dave pause. He didn’t quite understand the full meaning behind the words.

“You might, I might draw all of you… I’ve only gotten… Here, let me just show you.”

Dave scurried back into his room and emerged with his laptop and a few drawings. As they went downstairs, Eridan took one and sniffed it. “What the heck’s this ink made of? It doesn’t smell bloody at all.”

“Why would it smell bloody? It’s ink, not some unholy sacrifice to Satan, or something. Most of my stuff is online, so let me pull that up. Every troll sit down, it’s time to be introduced to the best thing on the internet.”

The other trolls were mostly gathered on the couches around the TV. Equius left the kitchen, still eating an apple. Sollux looked up from the unidentifiable gadget he was playing with. Feferi squeaked with glee. “Oh! Human culture! Come on, let us see it!”

“Okay, everyone, prepare yourselves for a pure ocular injection of awesome,” Dave said
dramatically. “I give you… Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff.”

The trolls held their breath as he opened the page, then stared in dead silence.

“Um. It’s very…”

Gamzee shrugged. “I’ve seen worse.”

Dave looked around at the trolls. “Seriously? You guys are missing out on the masterpiece of human culture right here. This is considered fine art. See, on Earth, there are two things master artisans such as myself do. One is rap, the other is create the most badass and spectacular comics this side of the universe.”

“This is considered fine art?” Equius said slowly, looking over the technicolor and oversaturated page.

“Oh hell yes, this is the cream of the art crop here on Earth. I don’t know how good your English comprehension as far as reading goes, but I will personally buy you Hooked on Phonics so you can get hooked on this.”

Dave slowly scrolled through the page, giving those viewing ample time to read each line. Terezi pushed herself closer and leaned in, nearly blocking everyone’s view. She sniffed the screen before she licked it. “Smells tasty and cool.”

Equius took off his glasses, polished them on his shirt, and put them back on. “I think my retinas just died.”

“No, that’s the flashing graphics. They can take people that way.” John handed him a glasses-cleaning cloth. “Here, take this. I think you got sweat on your lenses.”

Kanaya tried to find something to say. “I think this may be easier to comprehend if we were raised on Earth.”

Jade shrugged. “Not really. It’s mostly easier to follow it if you’re Dave.”
“I keep telling you, this is not going to work.”

“Hold still, you’re making me smear your paint.”

Karkat shoved Rose’s makeup-wielding hand away and scowled at himself in the mirror, dark-brown facepaint all over his face, neck, and arms. “Seriously? This is your great disguise idea? Unless humans are blind, there is no possible way facepaint and a hat is going to fool anyone! We’ll be dead as soon as we step out the fucking door!”

Jade sighed, looking up from painting Terezi’s claws red. “Karkat, we said before, humans don’t seek out anyone who looks funny in order to kill them. Just keep quiet and nobody’s going to look at you closely enough to notice anything odd! Terezi, don’t lick your nail varnish, I don’t know if it’s toxic to trolls or not.”

“She’s right,” Rose said, nodding sagely. “You’d be amazed what your average human can ignore.”

John placed a slightly battered fedora over Karkat’s horns and adjusted it. “There, see, you look fine. Kinda hipster-ish, but whatever. Just brush your hair over your ears a bit and try to keep your fangs hidden. I promise you on whatever’s important to trolls, we will bring you back alive. Seriously, we don’t need any reason for your boyfriend to be mad at us, he’s scary enough…”

“If you mean Gamzee, I wouldn’t call him a boyfriend so much as a constant fountain of aggravation.”

“Oh, that’s your opinion of everyone!” Sollux pushed his glasses back and looked in the mirror to check that his eyes were concealed.

Karkat sighed and turned to face the other trolls. “Okay. How do I look?”

Vriska fell off her chair laughing. Bec whimpered and hid behind the couch.

Dave tilted his head. “Sort of like a horribly deformed version of the young Michael Jackson. Horribly deformed in a different way from older Michael Jackson, I mean. I think it’s the hat.”

“He does not look ‘horribly deformed’!” Jade scolded him. “Little bit weird, yes, but nobody’s going to notice. They haven’t seen him as a troll, so I’m hoping they’ll just ignore anything odd.”

“What happens if they do notice?” Nepeta asked worriedly, checking that the horn-holes of her hat weren’t letting her hair through. If nobody looked too closely her horns could pass for plastic cat-ears.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, but instead of us shopping and running into a problem with food or items it’s better to have a few of you to cross-check. You know your species better than I,” Rose said, looking over them. “As I said, humans will ignore things and try to make sense of them, their first thought isn’t going to be of aliens or monsters. It’s going to be ‘strange kids’ or ‘that’s odd.’ Trust us on our species.”

“I feel like an idiot, can I get out of this shopping trip?” Karkat was looking down at his hands. “Seriously, this is humiliating.”

“No, fearless leader,” Vriska said, choking back the rest of her laughter. “You get to go on the fun
reconnaissance mission. I’m a little jealous, I think it would be fun.”

“Why don’t you just saw off your horns and take my place then?” Karkat snarled back at her.

Vriska stuck out her tongue. “No, can do, but you can tell me all about it, right?”

“Theriouthly, thith ith the dumbetht idea we’ve ever had. And that’th thaying thomething.”

Vriska clutched onto her stomach, laughing once more. “Oh, it hurts, it hurts. My stomach, my cheeks, my everything hurts.”

Sollux rolled his eyes, or at least that’s what everyone assumed, as his eyes were carefully hidden by oversized sunglasses. He looked down at Vriska and raised his middle finger. “Fuck off, for that I’m making thure no one getth you anything.”

Rose swung her handbag onto her shoulder and clasped her hands, businesslike. “Okay, is there anything specific anyone wants us to get that we haven’t listed?”

“Uh,” Gamzee said quietly. “If it’s not putting you to any trouble… can you please get me a set of juggling clubs?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Juggling clubs. You know.” Gamzee made juggling motions with his hands, as if Rose had missed his meaning. “Do humans have those?”

“What, those things that look like bowling pins? I don’t think we can just go out and buy those, but we’ll be happy to order some online. It might take a few days… Why juggling clubs?”

“I miss having a weapon.”

“You mean to tell us this entire time you’ve been unarmed?” Karkat asked slowly.

“Not unarmed, just armed with a fucking knife. Same one I used when I… But I’d like my clubs back. I can’t strife properly without them. Also, I can’t take you seriously when you look like that, so maybe we should save this conversation for some time later. When you look more like Karkat, and not a weird troll-human hybrid that should never have been hatched.” Gamzee looked around. “Is someone still laughing?”

Aradia smiled. “Be happy, Karkat. You are bringing joy to those who need it most.”

“I’m glad someone is finding humor in my misery. Wait, that’s pretty typical. I forgot how my suffering was actually a long-running troll joke. Maybe even one of the universe, everything stops for a moment and the endless void turns to me. Then starts laughing. My misery brightens up dying star clusters, and turns the universe into a—”

“Shoosh.” Gamzee wrapped his arms around Karkat, doing his best to avoid smearing the paint on his skin. Karkat mumbled into the taller troll’s chest. After a moment Gamzee released Karkat form his grip. “Better?” Karkat mumbled for a while, not saying anything but obviously not going to rant again. “Good.”

“I might not be ranting but I still feel like an idiot.”

“At leathth you’re not alone feeling like a moron.”

Rose looked at both of the trolls. “Nepeta and Terezi are finishing up getting ready. We’ll go soon.
The sooner we get through with this the sooner you both can stop feeling silly. Though to be honest you both look fine.”

Terezi threw on a floppy sunhat and sniffed the proffered hand-mirror. “Hehehehe. Look at me, I’m a perfectly normal monkey-thing!”

Sollux sighed. “We look like a bunch of athholeth. Thith ith thtupid, and won’t work. We thould juth quit while we’re ahead. I’m going to go wathh thith off, and juht go out hunting.”

“No, you’re not. You look fine, all of you do. A little peculiar in your fashion choices. But practically normal…ish. What is odd about you no one will notice as long as you remember to act human and leave the bulk of the talking to us. Now, all of you who are going on the trip, follow me. We’ll have to take every car we own, but all of can pile in… Mother, are you sober enough to drive?”

“I don’t have a deathwish, Rosey. I’d never drink and drive. Come kiddosh.” Despite the fact she might not be drinking, her speech seemed permanently slurred. The humans headed towards the door, followed slowly by the group of disguised trolls.

Karkat stood just inside the doorstep, tense as if he was about to step into a lion’s den.

“What’s the problem?”

“Th-this is the first time I’ve ever been out in daylight.”

“KK, I told you, the light here ith’nt thtrong enough to cauthe damage. It’th thafe.” Sollux pushed him gently in the back. “You can thee the light through the windowth.”

“Glass filters out the worst of it, it’s not the same.”

“According to Dr Lalonde’s tests and everything else we should be safe,” Kanaya said softly. “I’ll be there too, worst comes to worst I’ll drag your body back inside.”

“That’s very comforting, thank you.” Karkat rolled his eyes and looked at the doorway; again he sighed. “Now or never, I guess.” He took a few steps, Sollux moving behind him, slowly and just as cautiously. Even knowing the science and the lack of most risk, everything in them was calling them stupid for trying to go outside when the sun was out.

Karkat opened the door slowly, surprised by the heat, but it wasn’t as bad as Alternia right at dusk. Pleasantly warm, bordering on hot, but not a deathtrap sauna. Karkat swallowed before he took a step outside and stood under the sun, or a sun. Not the sun, there were plenty of suns in the universe. His skin didn’t burn, his blood didn’t feel like it was boiling, he was just outside, and it was kind of hot, and not wholly unpleasant.

Sollux stood beside him, both of them looking around the front yard out in the daylight, everything quite green, brown, and yellow. It was actually pretty cool, and kind of nice. Sollux smiled beside him and lifted a hand and splayed his fingers, looking down at them.

“I think I really like Earth.”

“This is kind of cool.”

“Kind of? They won’t nethetharily know that the thun ithn’t ath thtrong here. Thith is tho cool… I’m thure FF will love it. Highbloodth are alwayth tho cold, I’m pothitive thitting out in the thun would be really nice for them.”
“We should pick up one of those infat..infatea.. in-flat-able poolsh. The seadwelling trolls would love
it,” Dr Lalonde said, walking up behind Karkat and Sollux. “Maybe you would too, going for a
swim?”

“Guys, come on, you’ve gotta try this!” For once, Karkat was smiling.

Terezi noticed the change in his tone of voice, scurried up to him, and sniffed his face, not wanting to
lick and smear the paint. “Hehehe, I’ll have to remind you of this next time you make your pouty
face.”

Eridan started opening the house’s windows. “C’mon, let’s get some of that in here! No sense in
missin’ out.” He stood in a sunbeam and stretched like a cat. “Oooh. Oh, damn, that’s good. I de-fin-
itely like this place.”

“Picked up enough English that you’re starting to pun already?” Jade laughed.

“Yeah, punning is kind of a thing with us. It’s easier in Alternian.”

“How is it easier? I can’t imagine how that could be,” Jade asked, moving over towards Eridan.

“There are a lot of dialects in Alternian, one is made specifically for the ocean and those things
connected to it. On top of that, Alternian has a lot more wwords and availability for wwords than
Hu-English.”

“I don’t know if I’d want to try to learn your language,” Jade said, shaking her head.

“You could learn to understand it but I don’t know if humans could ever speak it. You’re not set
up for it to work.”

Jade nodded. “I’d still like to learn a bit of it, I mean, first human to learn an alien language.” Jade
paused for a long moment, reeling over what she just said. She figured at some point the shock,
surprise, and amazement would wear off, and when it did, no doubt all of them were going to be
afraid.

“We should get going,” Rose said. “We’re losing daylight, so many stores to go to and we do need
enough time. I promise those of you in human disguise you’ll have your chance to hang out outside,
but for now, let’s find a way to feed you and make all of you comfortable. Perhaps in return you can
figure out a way to not have the planet destroyed.”

Sollux nodded slowly. “Maybe, we can figure thomething…”

Rose sighed, at the very least the trolls were not great liars. Well, the few that were were amazing,
but the rest of them were terrible. “That wasn’t very convincing, Sollux.”

“I tried.” He shrugged, looking at Aradia and Feferi. “I know I asked before, but you both need
anything?”

“Other than food, and perhaps a change of clothes, I’m fine,” Aradia said. “Unless Feferi requires
anything specific I think that list applies to all of us.”

“Right, right, maybe thomehow I can find both of you a treat.”

Feferi laughed lightly, “Such a sweetheart.”

“Not really, you good?”
“I’m good.” Feferi tried matching his tone without the lisp.

“Then I’ll thee you thoon, ladieth.”

The humans watched each interchange, then several more like it. Terezi spoke to Equius, Vriska, Tavros, and Kanaya. Karkat made double sure with Tavros, Gamzee, and Eridan. Nepeta took a moment to talk to Equius, in a whisper, then she spoke to Eridan as well. Small subgroups within the much larger group. The group of humans watched each interchange, slightly amazed at how fast they could separate into groups, then rejoin as a solid unit.

“Alright, we’re almost ready to go, humans,” Karkat said. “All of you useless fuckers, gather around!” he shouted. The humans were even more surprised that the trolls all responded to the name “useless fuckers”. Karkat cleared his throat and started to talk in Alternian.

“I left Kanaya in charge. Self-righteous bitch she may be, but she can keep Vriska in line. She’ll be helping Jade make sure no one does anything stupid. Because if anyone decides to do anything dumb, I personally am going to jam one of Rose’s needles into the frontal thought lobe via the ocular globe and tube socket of the fucking perpetrator of thoughtless idiocy. Then while you’re slobbering all over yourself I’m going to walk you outside and sit you in the middle of a beautiful field of flowers. Why? Because humans like that kind of shit, and I will feel no remorse as you are taken, dissected, and killed for the sake of, start enclosure talons, ‘human scientific progress’ end enclosure talons.

“We are guests, act like it. I am sure all of you are thrilled about me talking right now. Actually, I’m sure all of you missed my now-rare and fun rants. But I don’t really give a shit about all of you wills and wants. Some part of me I’m sure gave a squat at some sad time. But right now all the douchebaggy ignorance from before is past tense and fuck it. There is no caring as far as you wants as far as present and future tense are concerned, we have time but not much. We’re a team, so none of you are above my leader infused punishments, rants, or rages. That includes you, Gamzee.

“Alright, now you you hornfondling dipshits get a moment to stop acting like a scared little hopbeasts. I expect all of you to have some type of scheduling for practice. I hope you, all of you, understand the position all of us are in, and we need to be ready. We have two options - well, I suppose three, but suicide has never sounded awesome to me. So I want plans, measures, ideas when I get back. We’re going out of our way to look like slobbering, headbashing, bulgestroking morons to make our stay more comfortable. I expect all of you to put in some goddamn effort, because I refuse to carry the team. The way I always fucking have.

“Unless you want His Verbose Imperial Empress Karkat Vantas, I certainly hope that you sad braindead friends of mine understand.” For a brief second, Karkat looked nervous. “We have time to fuck around, as long as we have a schedule. There are really only two paths, and I don’t know about all of you but one of those comes with even more invention than he could manage with verbal threats. They are far more actual. And I don’t want any of us to go through that…”

“Karkat,” Terezi said, putting her hand on his shoulder. “You’re starting to repeat yourself. I think we get it…” Terezi tried to look at the collection of trolls. “How about this? Let’s not let any one of us become our ancestors. Because they are either dead or assholes.”

“I don’t know, mine was pretty cool,” Vriska said with a shrug.

“Yeah, and she’s dead. Do you want to become dead?”

“All of us become dead eventually.”
“Howw about wwe become dead later rather than sooner? Like swweeps and swweeps downn the line.”

“Well, duuuuuuuuh, I didn’t think that needed orating.”

“Wwe got it, Karkat, I’ll get on my end of things. No doubt ewveryone has some wwork they can do. Wwell, except Gamzee as he doesn’t have a wweapon.”

“I got a knife, and it’s seen blood.” Eridan stepped back from the group. “But I ain’t really got one. We got it, bro. Go to be getting us crap so we can practice and figure out this shit even better. Also, make sure you double the food order. Not just for Solbro’s humors, but also I don’t want to wake up with Equius chewing on any of our legs.”

“Makara,” Equius hissed.

“Yeah, that’s actually not a dumb idea,” Terezi said.

“There is nothing shamefur about that, Equius. We all had to go through it, and it was kind of sweet for Gamzee to think of you.” Equius shook his head. “Though… Oooh, I wish I didn’t have to leave. I just, Karkitty, I think you and I are going to have to have a talk.”

“I noticed.” Karkat switched back to English. “Come on, humans and fellow hybrids. Let’s go. Kanaya, keep them in order.”

The group disbanded, and most of the remaining trolls went into the house. Jade and Kanaya waited on the lawn, watching the cars load up with the collection. From this distance they could hear Sollux talking about something, but the words were lost.

“Is Karkat usually like that?” Jade asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Kanaya sighed. “But he can be a great leader. His temper aside.”

“Jade!” Rose shouted out the window. “We’re picking up dinner, don’t worry about cooking.”

“Got it!” Jade shouted back over the sound of the cars starting and their wheels on the gravel driveway. She smiled a bit; it was weird how normal things could be even when she was standing next to a fabulously dressed gray-skinned and horned alien. “Bye!” Jade shouted as the cars disappeared around the corner. “We’ll be fine! Have fun!” She and Kanaya smiled proudly and went back into the house.

The couch was already on fire.

“Five minutes.” Kanaya didn’t scream but it was as close as her voice ever got. “Jade and I were gone for no more than five minutes.” Kanaya spread a blanket over the fire, cutting off its oxygen. “This cannot continue in the manner, or we’ll all be homeless. Which is quite rude to our hosts.”

Jade sighed. “Vriska, put the nailgun away. Equius, help Eridan off the ceiling, and stop dissecting the TV. Gamzee, stay out of the liquor cabinet.”

“Come on!” Vriska was still holding the power tool. “Can’t we have a little fun?”

“Vriska Serket!” Kanaya drew herself up and put her hands on her hips. “Drop the construction implement. All trolls we are going to clean, or do something productive. In punishment for your obvious lack of common decency.” When none of the trolls moved. Kanaya snapped. “All of you come here, at once!”
The trolls hurriedly assembled in line, dropping what they were doing, and Kanaya nodded. Maybe they were a bit of a mess now, but she could whip them into shape.
Chapter 33

Terezi sneezed violently as they entered the supermarket, and the other trolls gaped.

“So much food…” Karkat mumbled.

“So many colours!” Terezi gasped happily, covering her nose with her sleeve. “I may faint.”

“‘The selection has too many prices and values!’” Dave quoted, causing Terezi to briefly shriek with laughter before stopping self-consciously, realising people were staring. The trolls huddled behind Dr Lalonde, Sollux clutching a shopping cart’s handle like a life preserver.

“This is a box store,” Rose said. “It caters to any human need. Food, clothes, toys, home furnishings. We’re here for a general overview and food. We will move to other stores, and get some specifics off our list.”

“Thith place ith ridiculouth,” Sollux grumbled at the cart. “Ith it divided into thectionth? For like low and high income humanth, or thomething.”

“Remember, humans don’t work like that,” John said, nudging Sollux with his elbow. “The only reason we’d be turned away from anything here is if we didn’t have the cash to pay for it.”

“Do we?” Karkat asked. “Just making sure.”

“Well, with the amount of stuff you’ll need, let’s say it was lucky you landed with my mother,” Rose said quietly, tapping her purse. “This is the woman who spent fifteen thousand dollars on a picture frame for a drawing I made in kindergarten - did you see that horrible thing on our refrigerator? Rest assured, money is not a problem.”

“Okay, becauthe it wouldn’t be the firth time I wath turned away from thomething. Being a peathent is thhit thometimeth.”

“As much as I hate it, I know how you feel, Captor. I think the only one excluded is Terezi.”

“I was turned away too, online purchases as a teal blood aren’t any better. I wanted a certain weapon, a knife cane. I got turned away because I wasn’t nobility.” Terezi sighed, then sniffed, and her face lit up. She scurried over to the fruit counter and picked up a box of strawberries, then a bag of cherries, and inhaled deeply. “C’mon, guys, these are amazing! Smells like the fruit from my forest at home.” She licked the box.

Dave gently removed it from her hands. “Sorry, Rezi, there’s a strict you-lick-it you-buy-it policy in place. You might wanna cut that down, people will notice.”

“It helps me see though,” she whined. “Smell works but that makes it easier.”

“Well, we can buy you fruit anyways.” Ms. Lalonde was slurring less than usual. “I’d rather have you eat fruit than shweets.”

Nepeta sniffed the fruit curiously. “Yeah, all this smells safe,” she whispered. “I guess we can just eat really small bits and stop if we have a bad reaction.”

Sollux’s and Dr Lalonde’s carts were soon overflowing with food, mostly fruit and meat, along with
flour, sugar, butter, and various other trappings of baking - “none of that instant box junk”, in John’s words. Dr Lalonde relented and allowed the trolls to decimate the candy aisle as well; Nepeta’s cute face could soften the hardest heart, with the exception of Sollux’s, and they really did all need to put on some weight.

The trolls understood the meat section. Nepeta and Terezi argued quietly over the best cuts of meat. They even picked up some of the stranger meat items like tripe and tongue. Not that John or Rose had ever really tried either of those, they couldn’t judge, but it was strange to think how excited the trolls got over it.

Karkat sniffed suspiciously at a package of tofu. “What the hell is this?”

“Fake meat,” Rose said, grabbing a box. “It supposedly tastes similar to real meat, with a lack of dead animals involved. I never noticed the similarity, but Jade likes it well enough.”

Nepeta joined her in gathering packages. “Purrfect.” She glanced from side to side and whispered “Equius will love this, but don’t tell him I told you. I know we told him it’s okay here, but there’s no way he’s going to confess he’s…” She mouthed the last word. “…vegetarian.”

The amount of food in the shopping carts gained them many strange looks, but nothing more than something in passing. John had been a bit worried that maybe the other people in the store might notice something once they moved the piled carts up towards the register. No one spoke up, so it was just the quantity of food, not their company that was suspicious.

“Oh, hey, thhould we get one of thothe?”

John looked, and whispered back “Uh, Sollux, that’s not a shopping cart, that’s a walker. That thing in it is a human baby.”

“What, you can pick thothe up alive? How come they don’t do that with the other meat-”

“Okay, I’m just going to stop you there and point out that humans don’t eat babies, and we’re going to talk about this when we get back to the car,” John hissed urgently, looking around to make sure he wasn’t being overheard.

“You don’t? How do you thtop them overrunning the whole planet?”

“I repeat, we’ll talk about this in the car. No, there will be no eating babies!”

“Aww.”

John shook his head and resisted the urge to facepalm. Terezi opened her mouth and John stuck up his hand. “If this is about babies it’s better to keep your mouth shut until we get to the car. Then your Althernian can show, until then Earth culture only. And babies are precious and wonderful and we don’t eat them.”

Terezi closed her mouth. “Spoilsport.”

“Apparently,” Dave said, “humans taste like pork, so it’s better if you wait until they’re adults.” He gave a little shrug.

John looked at him with exasperation. “Dave, seriously?”

“I watched a show about cannibalism. It said they tasted like pork, I don’t know from personal experience. It’s not like I went to Meiwes Butcher and picked up a pound of human bacon.”
“When we get to the car I’m strangling you,” John mumbled as they moved towards the clothing section of the store. “No more talking about eating humans at any age. Or eating baby trolls because I’m sure they are just as cute as human babies, and that’s generally messed up.”

“Actually,” Karkat said softly, “baby trolls are kind of gross and slimy, and generally pretty disgusting. They don’t get tolerable until their first pupation, before that they are really sickening. So, you don’t have to worry about us eating ‘cute’ things. Plus, your babies aren’t really cute either, they kind of look like wrinkly potatoes.”

“Not to mention troll grubs hatch in batches of several million at once,” Nepeta whispered. “I guess mammals don’t have that problem, but if we didn’t eat grubs, there’d be no other food left. We figure the ones that don’t get eaten must be the ones with something to offer in the way of genes for being good at escaping.” She looked around at the racks of clothing that were now surrounding the group. “Ooh! What are these? The cloth looks a bit thin…”

“Pyjamas. Clothes worn for sleeping.”

“Oh, hey, I’ve heard of these!” Nepeta squeezed the soft cloth curiously. “Some of the highbloods wear clothes in ‘coon. Most of us don’t bother unless it’s really cold, it’s a pain to clean slime off cloth…” She looked wistfully at a kitten-print nightdress. “I guess we wouldn’t have that problem here. Are these okay to get?”

“It would be good to get you all a few changes of clothes, and perhaps two bathing suits so we don’t walk in on Eridan or Feferi in the nude again. Go on ahead and pick out sleeping clothes for everyone. Don’t worry if they are a little small or big, we’ll be buying fabric and other things to make them fit better. I already spoke with Kanaya about this.”

“So, you all generally sleep naked?” Dave asked looking at Terezi.

“It’s better than getting slime caked into your clothes. All of us are lowbloods or midbloods, we don’t have the resources to go through that many clothes.”

“Okay, your planet is scary but I’m starting to think it has its cool points… Where’d Karkat go?”

Karkat was in the toy aisle, stacking his own cart high with plush toys. He spun around and glared when he heard John giggle.

“They’re for Gamzee, okay?” He glanced guiltily at a fat yellow cat plush. “Er, except this one, that’s for Nepeta.”

John giggled even harder. “What, the big scary guy with the huge sharp teeth likes plushies?”

Karkat shook his head. “It would be a good pile for the both of us, and they’ll make him feel better. But, yeah, I guess you can say he ‘likes’ them. I don’t know anyone who outright hates soft toys.”

“Aww, that’s cute! Oh, go on, keep scowling, pout harder - yeah, that’s adorable,” John said, grinning and pulling out his camera phone. Karkat grabbed it and captchalogue’d it, ignoring John’s protesting yell. Terezi took advantage of the distraction to sneakily captchalogue markers, chalk, and crayons.

Karkat rolled his eyes. “You’re a jerk, Egbert. one day you’ll be glad I knew to pick up a stack of plushies for him to make a pile with. Then I’ll shove those words back down your throat.”

“Well? He’s weird, but he’s not exactly terrifying.”

Karkat snorted at John’s comment, turning back around and grabbing the cat pulshie. “Yigo,
Nepeta." The smaller troll bounded up to Karkat.

"Yeah, what is— Oh my god, is that for me?"

"I saw it and thought of you. I was picking up stuff for the pile and I couldn’t help but grab it for you."

"Karkitty, you’re so sweet." Nepeta snatched the plush out of his arms and gave it a tight hug. "Thank you."

"It’s not… Pounce? I think that’s the translation… It’s not your lusus, but maybe it can help."

At the checkouts, the group split up, each subgroup taking their cart to a separate checkout for the sake of speed. Karkat stacked produce on the belt as Rose and Dave helped the bag-boy, trying not to make eye contact with the dreadlocked girl at the register for fear she’d see through his sunglasses. She was looking curiously at his hands. Oh fuck, what was wrong? Had he done something?… His breath caught as she squinted at his hat. He didn’t dare touch it for fear of drawing further attention.

"Yeah, what?"

"Uh, nothing, sir, but…"

Karkat tried to smile without showing his teeth. Oh fuck, here it came…

“… pardon me for saying, sir, but aren’t you uncomfortable wearing a hat and gloves in this weather?”

“Uh.. I.. It’s…” Karkat could hear his strange accent. It felt like everyone was looking at him, though he was almost completely sure that only the humans that he knew had heard the comment. He didn’t know what to say. He could say he was just cold, but that seemed like it would be stranger than if he had some type of excuse. Something better than the fact that he was an alien in disguise, which seemed to be the only thing he could think of. He knew this wouldn’t work.

“Hey, listen… Lona,” Dave said, leaning towards the cashier, taking in her name badge. “Do you usually make comments like that at people? He has an illness, sheesh, maybe he doesn’t want to talk about it or be treated like a total freak when he’s out in public. Did you ever think about how your words can hurt people?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I just think it’d be too hot to wear any of that. I didn’t mean to be rude…”

“It is too hot outside, but as you see we are inside.” Rose said with a little bit of a smirk. “It’s air conditioned in here. He has… cryo-… -globul-in-… -emia, and if you see something like this again it might be best to not ask questions.”

Dave glanced over at Rose a little smile on his lips. The both of them were coming up with a great cover-up. Rare disease no one who didn’t spend time watching medical shows or doctors would know.

“I apologize, it was just a bit strange. I’m sorry sir, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

All of the trolls were staring at this woman, wondering how she survived. Also, all of them were confused, not too sure why this human was apologising. They understood humans were different, but this was more than a little odd. No one had ever apologised to Karkat. Out in public, he had been nothing more than a rustblood. He nodded, not too sure what a human would say in return to an apology. He settled for a hesitant “Thank you?”
They paid quickly, the cashier obviously embarrassed by her words enough that she checked them out without more words than giving them the total. The trolls were looking at the amount of bags in the carts, not quite sure how to understand how much human money had been spent, but they could tell by the amount of things it was too much.

“Hey.” Karkat leaned over to Terezi. “How do we pay this back?”

“I’ll ask Dave when we get a moment.” Terezi had a hard time keeping her whisper down so only they could hear it. “That’s a lot of stuff, and we’re apparently not done…”

They made it back to the collection of cars, all the trolls trying not to nervously glance between each other. All of them had the same thought; how were they going to pay back the amount of money and risk the humans were taking? Even with the trolls shoosing the humans away from the carts and loading up the plastic bags, it wasn’t enough time for all of the trolls to steel up their nerves to ask. Rose climbed into the bigger car, followed by Dave, John, and the horde of human-dressed trolls.

“Alright, Auntie Anne said we’re going to go get blankets and shit next,” Dave said looking at Rose.

“I assume she’ll lead the way, and we’re putting them in her car, We might have the refrigerator-bags, but I don’t think it’s a great idea to wrap the perishables up in blankets. Luckily it’s not too warm today, which will help. I wonder if we’re going to head to Potsdam on another shopping adventure later. No doubt that would just be the humans, that drive is long enough that the paint may melt off.”

“Um,” Terezi attempted an interjection, but was unsure of what she should say. “Can we ask you all a question?”

“No, this is the no questions allowed car. Only statements,” Dave said. “We can’t have any questions, too much doubt, instead only statements.”

“That’s kind of really weird, but okay, if you say so.” She shrugged and glanced over at Karkat before she looked out the window.

“Woah, woah, wait. That wasn’t serious, that was like sarcasm… or something.” Dave turned so he could look back at the trolls. “No, you can ask your question, I’m just being a bit of a dumb shit.”

“Dave,” Rose said in a low tone, not moving her head to the side. “I don’t think they know exactly what sarcasm is. Let alone with a statement like that… I believe that they have yet to remove the cultural impact of growing up in a highly militarized society with a dictator.”

“Then why wouldn’t they get sarcasm? Isn’t that something you’d learn?”

“No, I think they learned how to obey. Not how to really speak their minds. I know it’s strange to think, but I don’t think they grasp the concept of ‘freedom of speech’. To be honest, if it’s in our bill of rights, I’m sure most of those are an extremely foreign concept. If their nation is as… prone to violence as it seems it is.”

“More questions for another day?” Dave said with a nod.

“Yes. Trolls?” Rose raised her voice so the back of the car could fully hear her. “You’re free to ask whatever questions you want. Even if they are rude. Here, in our nation, any being may speak their mind however they wish.”

“Because, freedom. Eagle screech, with the stars and stripes as a background, freedom. Which… Eh, what was your question, T-Rez?”
“Well.” She glanced over at Karkat, then at Nepeta and Sollux. “We don’t have anything, I mean, we don’t have any of your Earth money, or many items. I suppose we have some knowledge, but that’s not a good form of trade currency… First, why are you helping us, and second, how are you going to want return payment?”

“Because,” John said, with a smile, “When we were all younger we swore we had this huge epic adventure to go on, we used to talk about it all the time. Life was just normal, and maybe it was just to escape some of the realities of it for a while. So now this is the adventure.”

“All of you, so far, are not malicious, and apart from the fact you’re aliens you’re a lot like us. I can’t imagine being handed over to doctors or scientists for experimentation. Also you’ve proven something to us. There is this old saying, it went something like: I don’t know which is more frightening, the idea of there being other life in the universe, or the idea that we are alone. Alone would be even more terrifying than there being aliens under dictatorships. Though I always assumed aliens would have more tentacles, but I can’t always be right.”

“So, I guess what both of them are saying is, we don’t really know. It’s awesome that you’re here and real, but we’re helping you because to us it seems like the right thing to do. All of your tough masks aside, all of us are keenly able to sense fear. When we met all of you it was obvious that you guys are scared and wary. Shit, if I landed on your planet I’d be the same way. But I think we all know the real reason we’re helping all of you, and that my friends, is hoverbikes.”

“Hoverbikes?” Nepeta asked, cocking her head a bit to the side.

“We were all promised in childhood we’d have flying cars, that shit didn’t happen. So I’m settling for hoverbikes.”

“Dave’s stupidity aside,” Rose said, the eyeroll obvious in her voice, “he’s right, it just seems like the right thing to do. Maybe we’ll regret it, maybe we won’t, but no matter what it was the right thing. As for paying us back, it won’t be necessary.”

“We have to do thomething. Nothing in life cometh for free. Not without… I mean there hath to be thomething you want from uth.”

“How about you talk to us about your world, about space, about what else is out there?” Rose said with a smile. “I’m sure there are many wonders we can’t imagine.”

“Or tell us about your technology. How your stuff works, how you code and create all the things that let you travel at the speed of light. Because oh damn.”

“John, don’t cream your pants. Reminds me, maybe let Auntie Anne see how close we are biologically. Just by looking at your DNA and shit. I just want to be an intergalactic envoy. That shit would be dope.”

“Dope?” Rose said. “Really, it would be ‘dope’?”

“It would be. Pay us back by eventually showing us space.”

“That’s assuming we survive,” Karkat said with an eyeroll.

Nepeta smacked his arm. “Okay, if we get a new ship or Equius and Sollux can fix ours, we’ll take you to space. I think that’s a fair trade.”

“I’m with KK, athuming we thurveye.”
“Oh, don’t be such a… humans, what’s a phrase or word that means someone who is always annoyingly depressing and can’t keep a pawsitive outlook to save their life and should be smacked for being stupid?”

“Stick in the mud? As in: ‘don’t be such a stick in the mud’.”

“Or ‘don’t rain on my parade’ would kind of work.”

“Sollux, Karkat, don’t be such sticks in the mud after the rain on the parade. Sheesh.”

“Mixing metaphors,” Rose said, “or cliches, is a terrible habit Nepeta.”

“Oh… oh, sorry.”

Eridan had set up a row of empty Coke cans balanced on a low and relatively horizontal branch. He hoped his aim was still reasonable; he’d had no chance to practice since he lost his eye, and now his depth perception was thrown off.

He readied himself for what would probably be the most depressing shooting practice of his life. On the bright side the humans said they were isolated enough no one would notice him practicing or the fact he was firing a gun.

His shot lined up, Eridan took a breath and let it out slowly, firing towards the cans. He only hoped he hit at least one of them. He could hear a few branches snap. Which meant he was off; he mentally groaned, worry settling in. If he couldn’t shoot anymore, they had lost their only distance weapon apart from Equius’ frankly unreliable archery.

“What the heck was that noise?… Eridan! Be careful with that gun!”

Eridan turned to see Jade running up behind him. “Aww, Harley, I’ve been usin’ this thing since I could wwalk. I think I knoww wwhat I’m doin’. Or I wwould if I’d had any fuckin’ chance to practice since I got the fuckin’ patch…”

“Oh,” Jade said, actually looking at the gun in his hands. “I guess if you need to practice… I’ve never seen a gun like that, what is it?”

“It’s Ahab’s Crosshairs. It’s an old standard Alternian gun, but modified to hell and back by my ancestor swsweeps and swsweeps ago. It wwas pretty normal, it’s noww a bit more superpowwered.”

“Oh, wow! Can I see it?” Jade took the gun from his hands and stroked the barrel, fascinated. “Wow, I’ve never seen a gun you could stab someone with, heehee! Is this a laser gun?”

“Wwhat else wwould it be? Wwhat do Earth guns do?”

“We’re still on the bullets stage, I’m afraid. We do a lot of cool stuff with the basic theme, though, my grandpa collects guns and I learned a lot about them. I’d never aim one at a living thing unless it was an emergency, of course, but…”

“Bullets?” Eridan’s brow wrinkled. “Oh, solid projectiles, you mean? Wwe havn’t used those for millenia, most trolls don’t remember ‘em. I did my research, though,” he added smugly. “History of wwar and wweaponry, it’s fuckin’ cool.”

Jade looked up, a competitive grin on her face. “I have an old BB gun in my room, what do you say
we compare the two?"

Eridan smiled. “Sure, I’ve never fired something with a solid projectile, might be pretty awesome. Do you want to fire the Crosshairs?”

“Would you mind? I’ve never fired a laser gun before”

“No, I wouldn’t mind… just be warmed it packs quite a punch. I’ve got it set on a lower beam but it will be totally different than your bullet guns.”

Jade nodded, checking out the rest of the gun, keeping mindful she didn’t know exactly how it worked; as long as she didn’t pull the trigger she was pretty sure she would be okay. “Let me go get my BB gun, it might be better to practise with that for awhile, move up slowly. I might be able to talk to my grandpa about sending some other guns up this way. We could practise shooting together… If that’s okay with you.”

It was agreed, and Jade fetched her gun. Eridan held it carefully, not used to the smaller weapon and half-expecting it to break in his hands. He took aim at the re-aligned cans, pulled the trigger, and missed entirely.

“Hajenu!”

Jade blinked. “Was that your native language?”

“Um, yes. Sorry, that wasn’t the first word I’d have wanted the new species to pick up.”

“Heehee, it’s okay! Would you mind teaching me a couple of better words? Or approximations of them. I don’t think human throats can make that noise you just did.”

“I guess I could. Is there anything you want to know? I haven’t taught a language before. I don’t know what would be good to start with… I could just teach you the middle chord. Most trolls would probably understand it anyway. Your stress would just be off. But that’s not bad for a mammal.”

“Well, it’s worth a try, right?”

Eridan grinned. “Na!”

~~~

“… and it was about that point that the lieutenant opened the door-” Eridan opened the back door and shut up abruptly as he realised Kanaya and Equius were in the kitchen. “Oh, hey, guys.”

“Hi!” Jade waved. “Everyone behaving themselves?”

“So far so good,” Equius said, nodding.

Jade stared. “Okay, are you seriously eating an entire bag of sugar? Isn’t that taking the horse gimmick a bit far?”

“I’m about— I have a medical condition! It requires a lot of energy!” Equius protested, waving his spoon.

Eridan rolled his eye and leaned over towards Jade. “Don’t freak out or anything, but he’s about to pupate. Doesn’t want anyone to know. Which seems pretty dumb since you guys won’t miss Equ’s sudden disappearance or the huge blue cocoon.”
“Ampora,” Equius growled.

“Wwhat? Seriously, you can’t hide it from them forewer and it might be better to give them some forewwarning. That wway the don’t just see the cocoon and freak out. I’m thinkin’ about the long term here.”

Jade frowned. “Pupate? Do you need somewhere safe to do that? We can set up a spot in the basement, but if you need somewhere quieter or something…”

“Uh, well, I was going to go back to the ship…”

“What if someone else found it? You might end up getting found by someone who doesn’t know what your cocoon is and damages it.”

“Well, Nepeta said she would be protecting me. Though usually that’s not a surprise, quadrants tend to help out their mates, or I guess chum or friend might be a better translation since mate has other unexpected connotations…” Equius cleared his throat. “Quadrant partners tend to help each other during pupation. It’s a dangerous time, beasts do see troll cocoons as an easy snack. But with Nepeta’s help I wouldn’t have to worry about other humans, and I don’t really know if setting up my cocoon here is wise.”

“It would still be safer, if other humans find your ship. Nepeta might have to kill a lot of them and that would probably make the human race a little less likely to sympathize with you. I’m sure people are already looking for what fell from the sky. Though I’ve been told you guys hid it very well. Still, it’d be safer for you in here. We’re not going to do anything to your cocoon. Promise.” Jade raised two fingers with a nod. “Girl Scout’s honor.”

Bec charged up, his paw mostly better, and jumped on her, barking happily. She laughed and pushed him down gently. Eridan nervously patted the dog’s head. “Aww, I think your lusus likes me.”

“My what? Oh, no, Bec’s not like your… animal parent things, he’s just a pet.”

“Oh. Wwell, I like him at any rate an’ he seems okay wwith me.”

“Bec likes everyone! Don’t you, boy?” Jade gave Eridan a brief hug, and pulled away when he tensed. “Are you okay?”

“Um, yeah. Sorry, just took me by surprise…”

“Ah, okay, I’ll warn you in future.” Eridan blushed, and Jade returned to patting Bec. “Aww, c’mon, boy, let’s go outside…”

Jade and Bec ran outside, and Eridan watched them go with a daydreamy smile. “Heh… Hey, wwhy are you looking at me like that?” Kanaya smirked silently, and Eridan bristled. “Wwhat? It’s not like that, I told you all on the ship. I’m not ready to fill the concupiscent quadrants right now, wwith aliens or not. Wwould hardly be fair wwith my, uh, condition.”

“True, but I know that look. You’re absolutely sure you haven’t slipped back into your old ways?”

“Hey! Jade is really nice and she’s a fuckin’ crack shot, I really do wwant to hang out wwith her for reasons not inwolvin’ her wenom sacs, okay?”

Without looking up from what he was doing, Equius interrupted. “Humans are mammals. Those are not venom sacs, they are milk sacs. They are for feeding infants.”
Eridan threw up on the floor. Equius looked dispassionately at him and added “I’m not cleaning that up.”

“Blech,” Eridan grumbled, scurrying to the sink and rinsing his mouth. “And you think you can make fun a’ me? I’d think you’d be all over the mammals.”

“Yes, because a man who has to make a conscious effort not to smash furniture and a small breakable pink monkey is an excellent combination.”

Kanaya chuckled. “I see you are mastering this human art of ‘sarcasm’.”

“Okay, I see your point. Wwell, I guess it could be a good combo. For a necrophiliac.”

“Charming.”

Eridan started going through the cupboards, and soon dug out a rag and a mixing bowl, which he filled with water, and knelt to clean up the mess. “‘Sides, I noticed you already got your eye on a different pink someone.”

“Wh-what?”

“Hey, wwhat did I just say about makin’ fun of me?”

- 

Yigo: Hey, Yo (This is a way to call another over)
Hajenu: Shit. (All curses end in the -enu ending, which can make any word a curse word. For instance: foot = bali l balirenu is like saying ‘one who likes being walked on’. Or something similar. Of course, this rule isn’t 100%, some old highblood Alternian words have moved over to the new Alternian and stayed being an insult without the ending. “Muvetir”, for instance, was old highblood that got passed around to everyone and became the colloquial for slut. But a word like “asshole” - “norhaajarenu” - will have the -enu ending.)
Na: Okay, yeah, yep, sure. (Comes from the longer “nanya”, which is the formal version of yes.)
Anj: nah, nope, or a friendly no. (“Anjya” is the formal no.)
Chapter 34

It took until Gamzee found himself in familiar surroundings for him to realise he was asleep. He was unsure if this was good. It had been a long time, he was starting to feel ill again. On the other hand, this might be the Trap or it might be a nightmare taking its inspiration from his memories of it. Would the Kin even let him in, after Eridan?

He didn’t feel the darkness shift, and he could only assume it was a nightmare. Still, that lingering rage felt too familiar, and he doubted his dream could capture it. He looked around quickly, and sighed. He didn’t even know if he should call to test the theory. Maybe he could just wander, until he woke up. Then again, if he didn’t wake up for a long time, he could risk his ancestor sensing him. Assuming that both of them were asleep. Assuming that’s how this worked.

He looked around one more time, before he began walking. Not going anywhere in particular, just walking through the Trap. He figured he’d know soon if it was a dream, if it was the Trap he was probably doomed to wander around alone. He knew this place had walls. The more he thought about every time he’d been here the surer he was of it. His first experience was before he’d ever bled in front of his ancestor.

He wished he had paid attention to the ghosts telling him to run, to get away. If he would have, he wouldn’t be dreaming about this place. The presence in the distance felt like it was shifting. Gamzee could feel every muscle in him seize up. It was a nightmare. Soon there would be a growl and his ancestor would find him. Space between them meant jack shit when his ancestor and him were linked like this.

“He’s teachin’,” a voice said beside him. He recognized it. “Or showin’ his pow’rs off.” Gamzee looked over to the troll beside him. He couldn’t help a little smile.

“I thought all of you would be leaving me to my own devices, Pyeran.”

“Why’dya think that? You’re like him, ain’t like you are him. You got problems, but that’s okay.”

“Pyeran!” another voice said. Gamzee knew it just as much, but he figured he’d be sure before he said his proper hellos.

“’s true though, Kes. He got prol’ems but he at least knows that he got ‘em.”

“Sorry about him, he never had the chance to grow up and learn to hold his tongue.”

“It’s no problem, Keskay,” Gamzee said nodding. “He’s right.” He trailed off. Something wasn’t quite right, but it took him a moment to place it. He looked closer at Keskay’s face. “Are you actually smiling?”

Keskay’s - yes, it was one - smile widened just a little. “Mm. It’s been a while, but yes. We have you to thank. We almost gave up on you but you’ve pulled yourself up. You’ve given us the first real hope we’ve had in so long.”

“Heh, well. We’re not out of the motherfucking woods yet, not by a long shot, but… Thanks.”

“If it wouldn’t raise awkward questions I’d tell you to thank your auspistice on our behalf. It was seeing you with her and the seadweller which convinced some of the Kin to take another chance on you. Seems to be working so far.”
“I didn’t mean to be taking his eye,” Gamzee sighed. “I took what all of you all said to my beat, but shit, I couldn’t make myself go and he wouldn’t. I was willing to all try, just got hard. I’ll be sending your thanks. Just be saying thank you. They ain’t got many reasons to question me being any type of motherfuckin’ thankful.”

Keskay gave him another smile. “Why were you roaming? It’s not really safe for you. You could run into him, or I guess where he is strongest. He might notice you.”

“I didn’t know if this was a dream or the Trap. Didn’t know if it was if anyone here would be making to care. Maybe some part of me wants him to notice I’m here. Get my talk on with him, where he can’t get to me. I think I’m just getting reckless.”

“Nah, you were reckless, you’re gettin’ thoughtful. Though all of us would prob’ly think you’re dumb to try to talk to him, he’s the king here. We’re just mem’ries.”

“Don’t think I’d actually do it, Pyeran. I’d get too scared before I could. Run off more than motherfuckin’ likely. Vanish myself back to the shadows.”

“You’re lucky we found you,” Keskay said. “Carry on any direction to long in this place and you end up at him.”

“Quite vain of him,” Gamzee said softly. “Then again, I am talking about the motherfucker with the throne. So I guess it’s all kinds of expected.” Keskay shook her head, but her smile didn’t waver. “Can I be asking you both a few questions?”

“Sennir said you were curious. Yeah, you can ask us questions. Just some of them we might not be able to answer. But only if you’ll answer some of our questions.”

“It can be a done deal then, Kinsis.”

“Do you mind if I call the horde? No doubt Laneen and Sennir would be happy to see you as well. Believe it or not, we can’t sense you when you arrive. This time you didn’t let off your usual signature. Sort of like a mental yell for one of us.”

“You’re free to call them if they do want to be seeing me.”

“Rani?” Keskay patted the greenblood on the head. “Stay here, so I can find my way back.”

“No pro’lem.” Keskay pulled away and let herself be pulled back into the shadows. Gamzee found a spot on the floor and sat down. Pyeran moved and plopped himself down next to him. “I meant that, you’re not like him. I mean you are, but y’r nicer.”

“Nah, I ain’t nicer. Just different. Motherfucker likes to bend shit until it breaks. I like to bend shit ‘til it’s something motherfucking else. Though I know what you’re meaning and it’s all types of sweet.”

“I think you’re nicer. Whene’er the Keeper shows up here he always is mean. You show up here and you’re hurt. Trust me, I been here for what’s like eternity.”

“Do you even know how long you been here?”

“Not the exact time. I don’t really remem’er the sweep it was when I died. Been here forever though. I know I was here before they went t’ space. They took me on Alternia. I don’t think they’d been doing it for a long time either. I could hear through the walls, the seadwellers still talked about the old Empress. That’s not saying much though. They could have been 100 sweeps old with seadweller memory.”
“Why you thinking they ain’t been doing it too motherfucking long?”

“I didn’t quite fit with their rules. The youn’est they e’er took, not much a title, but s’my title. I was too small, didn’t work out well. Well, worked out better for me. Still was bad, but not like some of the things they got in ta.”

“Do you remember how old you were?”

“I was going t’ be six sweeps in a few perigees. She caught me beggin’ around the city on one of her public appearances. Things were really dif’rent then. But, I got rolled up with them. The longer you’re here the more you forget about life before them. It’s dumb, but I didn’t want t’ forget that I frustrated them by being the wrong age, the wrong size. Not much, kind of gross. But just something I wanted.” Pyeran sighed. “Guess I did better’n Sennir, ‘e sorta got somefink ‘e wanted by showin’ up ‘ere, poor feller was a mess ‘bout that… well, I’m sayin’ too much.”

“I get it. Sort of, don’t think I can ever fully get it. Ain’t in any motherfucking troll to always be so understanding. But I can’t be imagining me at your age being forced through what happened to me.”

“Eh, they couldn’t do much without killing me. I mean they still did terrible stuff, but not like some of the stuff others have gone through.”

“How did you all die?”

Pyeran smiled a little bringing his hands up to his head. Clutching onto his chin and horn he twisted his head around, until it was nearly facing behind him. “Broke my neck, accidentally. I’d like t’ think. They both seemed really surprised. Weren’t much of a welcome wa’on back then. Just a few a us. More Kin that got added the more rules he put on them. Which is why my neck innit all bloody. The first ones here don’t remember nothin’ but the Trap. They tol’ me though, it was back when the Keeper ‘n’ Hag were just above kids. If you lined us all up from bein’ first ones here to you, you can see how his mind worked and changed over the eons.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? You didn’t do it.” Pyeran shrugged. “Eh, I look on the bright side. I ain’t there no more. We’ve been watchin’ you and yer friends a bit, more fun than starin’ at four walls or havin’ to watch what they do to the latest newbie.” He released a brief unpracticed giggle. “This planet is sorta funny.”

“Glad then you’re enjoying it.” Gamzee smiled a little. “They always have that room? I don’t mean the Cell. I mean the whole thing.”

“Sor’a, not that room exactly. Something close though. Cell hadn’t always been there neither. I was locked up in a cage. One they got for shipping animals. Small enough it could fit me. Someone like Aniuous couldn’t have fit in it. But when they got it, did more, we all kind of attached ta it. Better than attaching t’ the Keeper. Seein’ his daily life was kind of like insult to injury. It’s like watchin’ som’ne being with your matesprit. Only that matesprit is being alive.”

“I feel like if I could talk to motherfucking all of you I could get a good history on Alternia. Weird how that is… I’m motherfucking sorry though, for all you.”

“As I’m sure you unnerstand, apologies don’t mean much. Ta us especially, it’s over. It’s done, no poin’ in apologising ‘bout things you can’t change. It’s you trying t’ be dif’rent, taking us with you, trying t’ break our binding. All a us think it’s impossible, but the thought counts.”

“There’s always a way to break a Sul. I just ain’t been getting the schoolfeeding I was needing to
know it. I’ll figure it out though. Before I end up dead, or I kill him. I ain’t wanting none of you motherfuckers to cross the plains with him. Then you’d be his servants even after death. I get why he’s been sealing you all to him now. Didn’t at motherfucking first, but now it’s all resting nicey in my thought-tray and I know I ain’t going to be the motherfucker to let that happen, even if you all motherfucking hated me. I’m trying not to be that tricky motherfucker who goes back on his promises.”

“So then, why?” Gamzee turned and looked at Laneen, who asked again “What use could he have for a bunch of adolescent ghosts?”

“Depends if he was thinking long motherfucking term or short term. Thinking though he’s going the long term, motherfucker knows how to use the church to make himself cushy. See, all of your souls are his, got applications while he’s being alive, but when he’d die, all you would cross over with him. Nothing according to the faith would be against the things he’s done. He’d cross over to the Carnival, all of you following along like a procession. He could offer some or most of you up to his motherfucking patron. Then if he wasn’t already going to be motherfucking rewarded, motherfucker would bribe himself up to some pretty powerful place among the Dye. With you guys given over, even with his reward, he’d get all sorts of motherfucking benefits. Least if…” Gamzee paused; it was stupid but it felt heretical to speak the names to non-followers, he needed to get over that. “Dyemar was happy with him. Be thinking he’s motherfucking thrilled.”

“I don’t know how I feel about being a bribe to a spirit,” Sennir said thoughtfully, sitting down next to Pyeran. “I have a feeling here and our lives’ torture would pale in comparison.”

“Don’t honestly know. Never been to that plain. Can’t unless I was being dead. Then we’d not be having this conversation.I mean I ain’t supposed to be talking to you all. But I can wonder for a while for this. The General I’m sure would be all types of understanding. ‘Course that means I didn’t bind myself, which is motherfucking irrelevant.”

“Keskay said you had questions?”

“He’s won’ering ‘bout us,” Pyeran said with a nod. Laneen smiled, taking her place on the ground next to Sennir. “Not that I blame him, newbies al’ays do.”

“It is the most obvious icebreaker. Go around the circle, tell us how you died.” Laneen shook her head. “Sometimes I forget how strange being dead is.”

“Eh, it’s death. It’s like life, but with more fri’nds.” Pyeran said with a nod before tilting his head and making it crack. Gamzee couldn’t help his wince. Pyeran laughed. ‘Innit like pain does much anymore. Sometime, I have t’ force it back into place. You should see Galnea sometimes, her head lolls around on its own. Her head was torn off. That was less accidental than mine. She gets a good laugh outta it she tells, ‘r tol’, newbies not to lose their head in the Cell.”

“Good you all been having a motherfucking sense of humor.”

“Sorry.” They all turned to look at Keskay, who had Aniuos and Ukuthe behind her. “I couldn’t find them quickly.”

“’S alright,” Gamzee said. “I ain’t one to rush any of you. This motherfucker doesn’t mind waiting. Don’t think no ones going to wake me here. Think they be understanding I don’t get enough motherfucking sleep as it is.”

“What are we talking about?” Ukuthe asked. “The normal newbie stuff?”
“Gamzee did inform us of one of the reasons he suspects we’re trapped. I will fill everyone in later. By everyone, I mean everyone who will listen.”

“Jantus is throwing another fit among the others.”

“When is he not?” Laneen rolled her eyes. “I would deal with him, but he is not worth the metaphorical air. And anyway, it is not my place to fight against him.”

“I’d happily kick the shit out of him,” Sennir said. “Is he trying to convince the others to turn us in?”

“As always,” Aniuos said, taking a place on the floor, followed quickly by Keskay and Ukuthe until they were sitting in a rough circle. “Of course, he’s not willing to go to the Keeper, neither are any of his lackies. I assume they are trying to convince someone more impressionable. Fucking seadwellers. No offense meant, Keskay.”

“I don’t know why he’d want to anyway. It’s dumb, and none taken, Ani. He’s everything wrong with seadwellers. Death doesn’t change all of us.”

“But, onto a slightly happier topic,” Ukuthe said. “Let’s not bore him with our pointless politics, and talk about our deaths.”

“Told ‘im ‘bout mine,” said Pyeran, his head flopping.

“And I suppose mine’s obvious. I was weakened enough that I couldn’t take the blood loss,” said Ukuthe, placing her fingers between her arm and her shoulder. As she moved her hand back down, the tear down the front of her shirt fell open. Gamzee saw one of the many cuts on her, and blinked in surprise. She noticed, and sighed. “Gamzee, please don’t stare at my chest. It brings back uncomfortable memories.”

“No, no, I mean… is that the Megido sigil? That’s my spooky sister’s sign.”

Ukuthe looked down. “This one? Yes, I think it is. He cut this one into me. Kept kissing my hair and calling me ‘Pooka’. I never did find out why.”

“Don’t mean to be making you uncomfortable, but I just couldn’t help but notice it. Same symbol.” It was difficult to be casual in a circumstance like this, but he was attempting. He cleared his throat.

“Keskay, Aniuos?” Laneen asked. “He knows about mine and Sennir’s. You two would be the ones who are left.”

“Once this is done can we play the game?” Anious asked. “Not that I mind telling him how I met my end, I just like the game.” Sennir shook his head.

“I honestly don’t know about it, but giving us warning gives us time to think.”

“My body was crushed, intentionally. Sadly, that didn’t cause my death. Sepsis took me finally. I wasted away in agony.” Anious gave a little smile. “Though not like Vanate. He died from drinking the water. He was the one who told me to write the warning. As far as any of us can tell he was the one bound right before me.”

Keskay swallowed. “I was eaten. Alive.” She shuddered, but raised her missing arm. “That’s why I don’t have this. And…” She lifted her shirt, her entire midsection missing. “Apparently, they are fans of the sweetmeats. My face fins were first. Supposed they could resist after a taste.”

“Um.” Another voice joined them. “Could I join? I can’t stand listening to his drivel anymore.” They
turned to face the new troll. She looked a little bashful, but was looking at all of them hopefully. “Rasasi,” she said softly.

“We’re just worried he’ll notice. But it doesn’t seem like it. So I don’t see why not.”

“Oh thank god. I was tired of listening to him.” Rasasi found a place to sit down in the circle. “Well, mine’s kind of embarrassing. They thought it would be funny to bet on whether I could drink fast enough to survive if my head was held under in a filled bucket.” Streaky violet slime ran from her nose and mouth as she shrugged. “As it turns out, I couldn’t, so technically I guess I won the bet.”

“Ouch.”

“There are much worse ways to die, trust me,” Rasasi said slowly. Her brown eyes flashing back to the shadows. “There are a few of us watching just outside this. We know why you’re all nervous, but better to listen to you than Jantus go off on one his monologues about all this. But Vanate is listening, and his death… Ah, it wasn’t pretty, or nice at all. He still doesn’t have pants.”

Gamzee nodded, and wasn’t sure if he wanted to ask for more details; he could gather quite a bit from what he knew already, and he wasn’t sure if that dissuaded him more, or if he wanted confirmation that what he was thinking was wrong.

“Most of us,” Ukuthe said. “Died from complications. Very few of us died intentionally, Kes Kay, Lanceen, and Sennir were all killed by them. With Kes Kay you could say it was complications, shock, and bloodloss, though I’m pretty sure they intended her to die. No one knows with Pyeran, it could have been intentional or unintentional. The rest of us wasted away. I always said ‘wait until you waste away’ should be one of the choices. It would cover most of us.”

“That is not much of a choice, more like a reality all of us have to face, a trial so to speak. Can you survive the conditions?”

“You’ve always been a strange case,” Sennir said. “They rarely gave us any medical treatment. Stuff for dehydration? Sure, not like you got. We’re not jealous, I mean you couldn’t even hope they’d kill you. Instead they’d keep bringing you back. But it’s just curious.”

“Think they’d been keeping me alive until they had Feferi. They kept bringing that up. Though I can’t shake the feeling that even after than the Keeper would have kept me alive. He wanted something, and I ain’t motherfucking sure what it is.”

“As shitty as wasting away is, or I guess was,” Ukuthe said. “It was better to close my eyes and fall asleep and wake up here than close my eyes and fall asleep and wake up right back with them. Never would have wanted that.”

“I’m sorry, sis, but I have to ask. See, I need to know all I can, why do you motherfucking got the Megido symbol carved into you?”

“Well, other than that’s how he got the blood for me to be sealed? I don’t really know, maybe it was just the way the cut fell.” Gamzee nodded. “I don’t really understand it. It was when we were all on Alternia, no one was in space. I went to register after my final pupation. Somehow, I ran into him in Natiane. He plucked me off the streets, I remember screaming for someone to help and every troll that passed just turned the other way.”

Gamzee swallowed and fought the urge to go and hug her. He could casually discuss their deaths, they were so matter-of-fact about that. But their lives seemed painful, hard to remember, and he just wanted to hold them and take that sadness away.
“I just realized, you might not understand, Alternia and the Empire changed a lot when all of us were banned to space. Natiane was the capital city. The Empress had her castle moved there before I was born. Among the yellowbloods, they’d tell me that their kind moved it brick by brick from further out in the ocean. If you got close enough to the castle the bricks would be stained in golden blood.”

“I know Natiane,” Gamzee said softly. “I think I might know why she moved her home there too. But I never knew it was the capital too. I thought that was out in the sea.” Ukuthe shook her head.

“It was ages after both of them had taken their thrones. After the Signless rebelled. During the period highbloods still knew his name. The Signless preacher, the mutant Sufferer. It was before they buried it under nightmares.”

“Can I ask you all when you were taken? Or is that some type of taboo here?”

“You can ask. We try to live by the doctrine that it has passed and there is nothing we can do now.”

“Not ‘til the Vast Honk comes and frees all. Or I figure out how to break it,” Gamzee said. “So, then my question stands; when?”

“I tol’ ya already. But on Alternia.”

“Alternia.” Ukuthe nodded.

“Space,” Laneen said pointing at herself and Sennir.

“Space,” Anious said. “Shortly after the rules were in place. I was alive during the rebellion of the Summoner. It’s a shame I didn’t side with him in life.”

“Alternia,” Keskay said.

“Space for me,” Rasasi said. “And there’s a new girl around - don’t know her hatchname but I think she has the Morney sigil. She didn’t even sign the Sul. We haven’t been able to get her to speak, we think she’s just too freaked out to go on alone to whatever she’d find next and latched onto us when he killed her.”

“Oh motherfuck, I’m sorry. That worse than sucks.” Gamzee looked around, and was fairly sure he saw a figure waiting in the shadows give him a brief nod. He couldn’t make out much detail - drooping horns, pigtails, and a hint of ruined stockings that might at one point have been striped - before the shadow disappeared.

“At least she has the option.” Ukuthe picked at her chest wound.

“You’ll have the option,” Gamzee said with as much hope he could muster into those words. “I’ll find a way. Just hard without someone of the the faith around. Unless I all be wanting to wander ‘til I could shoot the shit with my ancestor around here, but I don’t think he’d all be giving me an answer on how to free you.”

“What matters,” Aniuos started, “is you’re the first to actually have a chance at removing us. Letting us move on. Other indigos died before they could even start. You have some time on your side.”

“I’m working on it. By the way, thanks to you all - even you, new-Kinsis. You all keep me stable too. I realized I never all thanked you for the help in escaping either. There was cold around me, helping me leave, I guessed it was all of you. Stopped me from killing myself on that ship too. I got plenty of thanks I need to be gifting out to fuckers.”
“Just as we have helped you, you have helped us. Even if it is by moving us to another planet, for the
time being. Even if you die. You are the first legitimate hope we have at being free… I know it is
frowned upon, but perhaps you could tell us what would await us if we were allowed to move on.”

“You’re sacrifices to the Carnival and the spirits. Most of you would be seized, some of you are fain.
It isn’t so much if you signed the Sul either. Because it would be dependant on your motivations.
You have to be willing to completely sacrifice yourself for whatever reason. Be it some motherfucker
other than your ownsome, or you. Most of you would be seized since you all didn’t go willingly.”
Gamzee sighed. “Suppose if I died, I’d be fain, which is a scary thought. Not because it’s bad when
you die, I just hadn’t in me the urge to be. But it is honored I fuckin’ guess. But, you’d go to the
Blood Grounds, and you’d be divided by the phantoms, the Daleer, they’d then move you so you
might serve.”

“No matter what then we are serving?” Sennir shook his head. “That sucks, and I’m putting that
mildly since I’m trying to respect your beliefs.”

“Well, it’d be different. All of you would be. Sacrifices that are given to the Dye receive a weird
outcome, to the Dal we know. They go to the Blood Grounds, and are given all the space they could
need within the Carnival to live a pain-free afterlife. To do whatever they wish, until the Vast Honk
comes and we all become Hoa. You’d serve those visiting the Carnival, sort of like having a job, like
a motherfucker would run the rides, or give games for those to play, between the times that you can
also be doing other things. Things get shaky then because time doesn’t mean shit there. It’s forever
and never. All types of confusing without understanding just dawning.

“I don’t know with the Dye, because most Dyenejars are devoured by their patron. That’s seen as the
greatest revelry. Or maybe part of them is devoured and Dyemene keeps the other half. I don’t know.
Random sacrifices tend to be removed from their power to strengthen them. Unless that’s just
Dyemar. It’s fuckin’ complicated, and I don’t know if I can get my knowing on here.”

“Why?” Rasasi asked. “I thought the religion covered the whole universe.”

“It feels so unsacred here, on planet, funny, ‘cause here…. The Trap feels sacred. I know that sounds
weird, but like, they hide their dead. Afraid to see their mortality. Sad really.”

“This is coming from the guy who has two groups of friends, one of them dead, the other alive,”
Keskay said with a chuckle. “Maybe ask them where they hide their dead. If you need that
connection. Or perhaps you can see about bending the rules and abilities a bit. I don’t know how to
word this, I apologize.”

“Nah, get what you’re saying. Anyway, I can’t really commune. I’d have to speak with Dyemar
given…” Gamzee gestured at himself. “And I do think he is in my ancestor’s favor. I already broke
so many laws and rules praying to Dyemene. Any more and I’m sure to go through torment…
Again.”

“Never know until you try, and to be honest…” Sennir said, “I think faith is stupid, but we’re here
and bound by it. So are you, they can’t send you to torment if you’re bound here. Pray away, spite
those bitches.”

Gamzee laughed lightly and insincerely, knowing what the azureblooded troll meant by it, but still.
The thought of letting his soul be poisoned by any more rule breaking didn’t make him any form of
happy. He could feel the deep need to stretch, and the world pulling him back.

“Shit!” He cursed, trying to fight it off. He could see the ghosts’ slightly confused expressions. “I
want to wake up.”
“Then wake up,” Aniuos said. “We’ll be here, we are always here. When you sleep you can see us. There are many things we are, and understanding is one of the ones we strive for. Wake up, then come back. We’ll play the game another time, and it gives us time to think up answers.”

“All you fuckers are beautiful, and I give all my gratitude to your continued presence. In a way I never been happier to have carved myself bound, at least I have gotten to see your presence.”
Gamzee could feel his body shift and move. “I’ll see you all soon enough. ‘Til we make and meet again, Kin brothers and sisters. Keep on the paths, they guide you home.”

He felt no guilt giving them blessings, they deserved them as much as any other troll on the alive-plains. His eyes fluttered open, and for a brief moment both worlds were transposed on each other. A horror mockery of both realms. It sent a shiver through him, and he felt cold for all of a second before he blinked again and he was in the basement, lying on a pile of pillows, wondering if his friends were back from their shopping adventure yet.

He could hear the movement of his alive-friends above, and in the distance he swore he heard Ahab’s Crosshairs fire. He couldn’t help a small smile, then it vanished. He should make with the thankful and apologies to these friends. They had been through hell with him, and he was their tormentor. He shifted on the pillows once more. Maybe later, when the time was better. He still had a lot of questions that needed answers.
“So did you have any trouble while we were out?”

“Oh no, Auntie Anne, no trouble at all!” Jade kicked Vriska’s ankle, and the troll stopped whatever she had been about to say and pasted on a grin.

“Indeed, no trouble at all,” Kanaya lied smoothly. “No thanks to you, Vantas.”

“Yes, Kanaya, I’m telepathic and it’s perfectly reasonable to expect me to keep this band of idiots in line from multiple miles away. I can’t imagine why it slipped my mind.”

“Mreoww. Karkitty got claws.”

“Fuck you, Strider!”

Gamzee oozed up behind them, wielding a glass and bottle. “Hey, human-luscestor, I thought you might be wanting a drink?”

“Aren’t you suhweet!” she said, taking the glass and bottle. “You haven’t been drinking, right?”

“Oh no, of course not!” he said hurriedly. He looked hopefully at the bottle. “Without permission, I mean.”

“No,” Dr Lalonde said firmly. “You said it yourself, you’re only eight.”

“It can’t be too bad. I’ve put worse in me.” There seemed to be a joke in those words, judging by the way a few of the other trolls laughed nervously.

“No, sweetie.” Ms. Lalonde patted his head, and poured herself a glass. “You have to wait until you are at least ten, okay, pumpkin?”

Gamzee’s brow wrinkled. “What’s pumpkin?”

“Fat orange fruit,” said Dave, glancing at Tavros and whispering “More appropriate nickname for butterfly boy, I think.” John giggled, and Jade poked Dave in the ribs.

Karkat leaned up to Gamzee and whispered something in Alternian. Gamzee hissed back.

“What are you doing? I’m pretty sure that stuff is just alcohol, it’s not like sopor.”

“I don’t wanna risk a sober adult, either way. Sure, she looks harmless now, but…”

“I don’t think they are like trolls.”

“What if they are? What if they motherfucking freak out? I’ve already been locked up with two crazy motherfucking adults, I don’t want to make it three.”

Karkat sighed and nodded. He really couldn’t debate with Gamzee’s paranoia. It was instead just something he’d have to deal with. He really didn’t think that humans were prone to being that violent, but he guessed he could always be wrong.

“Oh, Doctor Lalonde!” Equius bowed politely. “I fixed the hole the seadweller was so ungrateful as to leave in your male wriggler’s ablation block ceiling. I’m afraid it’s a bit of a temporary measure,
but- ah, thank you, I see you did get some plaster, I can finish it now. Then of course the block was rather untidy, so I cleaned up, and I thought I should clean the hall while I was busy…”

“Well? Oh, that’s sweet! But really, there’s no need to go to so much trouble…”

“It was no trouble, really! We are inconveniencing you terribly, it was the least I could do in return.” Equius fiddled nervously with his hair.

“Rosey, these aliens are so nice. I’m very glad you’ve brought them home.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Rose said tersely. “Mr Zahhak, you’re not under any obligation to work for us, and if this is a social rank thing, we tell you humans don’t work that way.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Lalonde, I was only trying to help. I like having something to do.”

“You already have a real princess in your group, why not try lavishing attention on her?” Equius wilted slightly. “But she specifically told me not to…”

“Oh.” Rose looked surprised as she glanced over to Feferi quickly. “It’s still not required, I understand all of you have quite a bit to prepare for and do. You don’t necessarily need to help us with chores. Unless, you really want to, I suppose.”

“I am putting you to the most inconvenience of all of us, it’s only fair.”

“Why are you more inconvenient than the rest of them? You’re not the one who nearly shot John.”

“Let’s say it’s a good thing you just brought more food in,” Vriska said quietly. Equius scowled at her. “What? It is good they did. Or you’d start chewing on the walls. I don’t know how you would have fared on Alternia with how much you’re needing to eat.”

“I would have been fine, my caste has plenty of access to food during this time, and I was with the fleet. Finally, I would prefer you keep your concerns to yourself. There is no reason to be discussing this in front of the humans, or in general.”

“Oh, is little Equius-”

“Serket, remember who built your arm, and know they still have the controls.” Equius looked at Dave, and decaptchalogue something. “Oh, ah, mutant- sorry, I mean Strider, I knocked over your puppet and this fell out.” He held the item up, revealing it to be a nickel bag full of plant matter.

“What is i-”

“Nothing!” Dave tried not to squeak, snatching the bag away from the troll and stuffing it in his pocket. “Nothing… dammit, Bro.”

Rose glanced at her mother and changed the topic before any questions could be asked. “Eridan, have you been using my eyeliner?”

“I don’t know. What does it look like?”

“Dark purple liquid in a small black tube. In my bathroom, a location I gave permission to enter to Feferi but not to you.”

“Um, no, I haven’t seen anyfin like that,” Eridan said, not meeting her gaze.

Rose reached out and ran a finger along the purple line on Eridan’s face. “Really.” She looked up at
Vriska’s snicker, and sniffed. “And don’t think I can’t smell my shampoo on you, Miss Serket.”

Vriska puffed up with pride. “Oh yeah. Used the whole bottle. Doesn’t that make you… mad?” She grinned in a way the trolls recognised as flirtatious.

“If you’re going to use my grooming products, use them properly,” Rose tutted, tugging gently at a lock of Vriska’s tangled albeit sweet-smelling mop of hair. “Perhaps I can demonstrate to you how to use a comb.”

Vriska blinked, knocked off-balance. “I know how to use a comb.” She tried to mentally right herself.

“It doesn’t seem like it,” Rose said with a sigh. “Would you like some assistance? If you have too much hair to manage I can help, but then I will recommend you getting a haircut.”

Vriska blushed and took a step back. “It starts out brushed, just gets messy. Sheesh.”

“Well, if you don’t take care of your hair, perhaps you’ll wake up one morning with cropped hair and then you’ll have no reason to use a bottle of my shampoo.”

Vriska looked at Rose for a long moment, before she smirked a little. “I sleep with seven eyes open, little human.” Confusing flirtations or not, Vriska smirked toward Eridan, gloating at her little victory to the only troll she was sure would care. Then again Aradia and Terezi might care, but they were already dealing with plenty; she didn’t need to gloat on top of it and force Equius to mediate right now. One of these days someone was going to have to thank her for being so courteous.

Eridan sighed and shook his head. Vriska could sense the eyeroll, but she didn’t care. She could put a little flag on that victory and call it a night — day, this planet was messing with her inner monologue. She then raised an eyebrow, and had to ask the most important question of the situation.

“What’s with the paint, anyway?”

“Oh, I wanted to see what I’d look like with a second scar.” Eridan chuckled. “You know, just wondering.”

Vriska frowned at him, moved closer, and said, quietly enough not to be overheard, “Why would you want to be like Dualscar anymore?”

“What?”

“Well, you read Mindfang’s journal, you know what he and she both got up to…” Vriska said, nodding near-imperceptibly in Gamzee’s direction. “Okay, not nearly that bad, but still. Bit creepy.” Eridan took her point.

“That’s different.”

“How?”

Eridan had no answer.

~~~

“Seriously, Zahhak? I can’t believe you wasted your sylladex space on those things! We practically starved to death because you couldn’t leave your stupid collection behind?”

"Exchange of culture with the new species is an important thing, it’s not my fault you never
thought of that."

"Look, Equ, can you just take those down? Bein’ surrounded by those… things is makin’ me uncomfortable."

"Really? I’d have thought you’d seen enough."

Equius’ hand enveloped most of Vriska’s face, effectively silencing her. Eridan nodded gratefully at him.

“Oh, hey, guys, I see you’re busy decorating your — what the hell are those?” John dropped the pile of clothes he’d been carrying, and it was immediately scooped up by Kanaya, who tutted at the creases and started sorting them out. John didn’t notice, as he was busy staring at the unnerving posters.

“Clean clothes! Oh, you’re lifesavers, all of you, thank you…” Kanaya said happily, then looked back at John. “Oh, those. Yes, that would be Equius’ collection of fine Alternian art.”

“Oh, in human society that stuff usually goes under the bed,” said Dave, polishing his glasses as if in order to make sure he was seeing what he thought he was.

Gamzee paused in his attempts to pull on and button up a new shirt while only removing his arms from the sleeves of the shirt he was already wearing, causing bizarre lumps and movements under the cloth. “C’mon, Zahhak, take those fuckers down. It’ll save us all a lot of motherfucking time arguing with you.”

“No, these are fine and beautiful examples of Alternian art,” Equius said looking a bit defensive. “They are the most majestic creatures on Alternia, being around them should give us the strength we need to keep ourselves going.”

“They’re goin’ to give me nightmares… Look, I even made a human pun for you, noww take them down.”

“I’m sure you have plenty of other things to give yourself nightmares.” Equius smiled a little. “I like the human word better than the Alternian one, but I don’t like its connotation to the most wondrous of creatures.”

“The terms are unrelated,” Rose said shaking her head. “The ‘mare’ is an old name for a type of goblin or evil fairy that tormented humans in their sleep.”

“You guys have fairies?” Tavros said looking at Rose and Rose only, ignoring the posters and the orange flushing on his cheeks. “We have those, uhh, too.”

“This is fine art? Dave asked, looking directly at Equius. “Like you guys aren’t pulling our legs just to bother us, right?”

“The finest of highblood art. Most of it cost me an arm and a leg. Sometimes literally, I used to make extra money on planet by selling robotic limbs to highbloods that lost them. It was worth it though to have some of them. This one,” Equius said while hanging another, “is not an original, I couldn’t afford one given the artist’s status, but the reproduction print is beautiful.”

“Well, at least you’re passionate about it, but it just looks like porn to us.”

“Po— Oh my, goodness, no. I haven’t seen your fine art, but I’m sure it has nudity, would you consider that porn?”
“Depends on the artist, some of it was in a sense, though it generally had more metaphorical meanings so the artists could get away with it,” Rose said. “Dave, this is no worse than your brother’s porn.”

“I don’t like that much either.”

“I think it’s charming, this is a little more… obvious, but I’m sure it has its merits. I’m curious what a museum looks like on Alternia.”

“A bunch of musclebeasts and some very creepy abstract paintings,” Karkat said. “Then again you might think they are all creepy, it’s painted in blood. Or mostly blood depending on how rich the artist is.”

“Those abstracts aren’t motherfucking creepy, they’re whimsical,” Gamzee said, pulling the second shirt out of his other one and placing it on the pile of dirty clothes. “Rare you see them though. There are some others too, you got fetishes, and some paintings of scenery and stuff. Shit’s not all that entertaining though, museums hold what gets through the censors. Gotta check out street art and smaller collections for the interesting shit.”

“I wouldn’t take you for the art connoisseur.”

“I’m not, just wanted to work for the fucking censors. I’ve never painted… really painted before. Would have eventually, but hadn’t motherfucking yet. Nepeta’s the real artist among us. She’s got that shit handled. We all got our skills though, I’m sure talk long enough on any topic and you’ll find one of us who likes it.”

“That’s actually really cool,” John said. “We’re kind of the same way. I mean Dave’s got his music and his photography, Rose writes and knits. Jade has her nature and books. And me, I’m kind of the pranking master and computer geek.”

“Our dorkish demeanor is what binds us.”

“I don’t know I think we get much cooler than that,” Vriska said, leaning down to hunt through the clothes. “I made doomsday machines.” She grabbed another shirt and put it over one of the paintings. “Better.”

“And failed at it, Serket,” Equius removed the cloth from over his painting. “And refrain from trying to hide them. We could use the culture.” Equius didn’t hide his glance at Gamzee. “Most of us could use the reminder of place.”

“Should I all stab into Karkat’s arm and just paint a huge Vantas sigil over everything to be implanting that motherfucking culture in this room too? Just so we don’t forget about how motherfucking terrible the highest borns been treating those that can afford this art.”

“You could always bleed yourself out and see about painting a mural to your own culture,” Equius growled.

“Stop it you two, and no. I don’t feel like bleeding, or seeing my sign everywhere again. Gamzee, Equius wasn’t meaning any harm, even if his word choice was stupid. And Equius, you know better.”

“Right, Vantas. I didn’t mean to… offend or inspi—”

“Sorry, bro,” Gamzee hopped into the conversation, cutting Equius off.
“Alright good. Equius, could you at least contain them to one area, so we don’t all have to look at them?”

“They’re beautiful.”

“They remind me of daytime TV,” Karkat groaned. “Which is terrible enough, I don’t want to think about that here, not with everything else we have to worry about.”

“Daytime…?” Dave started to ask.

“Well, on Alternia nights and days are reversed from Earth, from what I’ve heard you say,” Terezi said. “You guys’ late-night TV is porn, our daytime TV is porn.”

“I thought Karkat was really against Maury for a minute.”

“Who’s Maury?”

“He tells humans who is the father… human-lusus of human-grubs.”

“Why would you do that?” Terezi said looking a bit disgusted. “What happens if their lineage is crappy?”

“So dad will help raise son or daughter with mom, human thing. I’ll show you Maury, and Springer, and Judge Judy sometime. They’re great.”

“By great Dave means terrible,” Rose interjected.

“I don’t know, Judge Judy sounds awesome, I want to watch it,” Terezi said with a smile. “Any show about a judge would be awesome. Also, to the lot of you,” Terezi attempted to face the trolls. “Why don’t you just ask Gamzee to order him to take them down? He’d be forced to listen, or get sweaty and distracted, and they you could captchalogue them.”

“You’re supposed to be on my side, Terezi! I thought that was the nature of our relation.”

“I’m auspisticing for you and the crew, I’m offering suggestions.”

“Wwould that even wwork anymore?” Eridan was pinching the bridge of his nose. “After ewerythin’ I mean.”

“I don’t care, I ain’t ordering no motherfucker to be doing anything, even if it means I gotta all look at a bunch of terrible images, that make me think about things, that kind of make me a little—”

“Point taken, I’ll move them to one area then.”

“Please, one away from my motherfuckin’ pile.”

The humans were staring, trying to understand the whole of the interchange, but a lot of it getting lost in translation. Though they could watch Vriska mouth a word at Gamzee then recoil. “Guys, guuuuuuuuys, He’s sweating someone go get me a towel. Ew, it’s making a puddle. Equius, why, why are you doing this?”

“Serket.”

“Just trying to lighten the mood. Don’t be so sensitive, Zahhak,” Vriska said mockingly. Equius sighed and continued to move the posters over by where he slept and out of the other trolls’ sight. The humans watched as the trolls descended upon the clothes one at a time and changed, confused
by the colorful fabric and committing fashion crimes no one had thought to invent yet. But even with
the bickering, all of them were smiling in some way shape or form.

“So, guys, we were just wondering how busy you were going to be with all your, um, war
preparations?” Jade asked. “Surely it’s not going to tie you up twenty-four hours a day?”

“Ideally it would, but we have to sleep,” Karkat said, stuffing the spare clothing he’d claimed into a
corner along with the pile of bedding and plushes. “We need all the help we can get.”

“Well, that’s not too healthy or fun! If you think about nothing else it’s going to make you ill.
Compromise, if you’ve got stuff to do which you can do sitting down you join us for some
conversation and human TV?”

“Hm, we will need to maintain our weapons and stuff…”

“Great! How’s five o’ clock tomorrow sound for your first human movie?”

“I didn’t say yes!”

“Oh, come on, Karkat, she’s right!” Feferi said. “Five sounds fine… Equius, once you’ve moved
those posters can you please find a good spot to hang this clock?”

“Certainly, Your Highness.”

“Gamzee, please refrain from murdering our hosts.”

“I love how you’re so calm about this!” John gurgled, doing his utmost to pull Gamzee’s arm away
from his throat. Karkat lay on the couch, clutching his stomach and trying to pull himself into a
sitting position. Vriska, who had walked in with Kanaya, applauded and started to chant “Fight!
Fight! Fight!”

“MOTHERFUCKING PERVERT was getting his creep on with MY MOIRAIL.” Gamzee hissed,
claw sinking into John’s shoulder. “Sorry, sunnysis, duty calls.”

“What? He said he’d eaten too much and didn’t think he could get up, all I did was ask if he needed
a bucket to be sick into-”

Gamzee dropped John and both male trolls gaped at him as if he’d grown a second head.

“What?! Oh my god, that’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard! Now I really am going to
puke!”

“Whoa. Okay, I’ve seen some sick shit, but that’s new!”

Kanaya shook her head and smiled. “Um, boys. Humans are mammals, remember? I am reliably
informed that they do not use buckets for the same purpose we do.”

John rubbed his neck. “Why, what do trolls use-”

“No,” Karkat said, holding up a hand. “We are not having this conversation.”

“Okay, in that case I’m just going to go on believing that trolls are insane.”

“You do that. It’s pretty accurate for most of this bunch anyway.”
“Note to self,” John added, still rubbing his neck. “Don’t mention cleaning products around trolls.” He looked up at Gamzee. “What the heck is with you? You were like the nicest of all the trolls and then you sort of Hulked out.”

“Uh, yeah. I do that. Sorry.”

“You occasionally Hulk out?” John asked. “That would have been good to know when you walked into the house.”

“Sorry, I have… anger issues. It sort of comes with my blood… Getting angry randomly, or being all stupid sometimes. Sorry about that. I forgot, but it’s just pails are a sensitive topic.”

“How was I supposed to know that?” John shook his head. “Also, warn me about your hate of cleaning products.”

“Well don’t mention… rags,” Vriska whispered the last word, leaning towards John, keeping it quiet and kept the word away from the purpleblooded troll. “You don’t want to see what Gamzee will do if you bring them up.”

“Really? Do you guys have something against cleaning supplies?”

“Well, most trolls see them as pretty… gross, I mean we go so far as to have little robots that do all our cleaning for us. They hide away in crates so we don’t have to see them. I mean, brooms.” Vriska shuddered. “I don’t quite understand how your species manages to look at them.”

“Huh.” John frowned, then gasped. “Oh, I’d better go tidy my bathroom! I don’t want Eridan to see anything that might upset him… Oh God, I think I left the bleach out in the open!” He scurried upstairs.

Karkat looked at Vriska, and started to snigger. “Oh my god, he actually bought it!”

“Wow.” Gamzee shook his head.

“Aha!” Vriska declared dramatically, pointing at Gamzee’s face. “You’re smiling again!”

“… maybe a bit.”

~~~

“Well I saw the thing comin’ out of the sky, he had one long horn and one big eye…”

Eridan sat at the table, tapping his foot in time with the music from John’s phone. “Hey, this ain’t bad.”

John smiled; if any of the other humans had been looking at him right then they’d know that smile. He nodded, shifting the phone so the trolls could better hear the song he was playing.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said proudly. “Keep listening, it gets better!”

"… bless my soul, rock and roll, flying purple people eater, pigeon-toed undergradowed flying purple people eater…”

The trolls listened curiously, until John started to snicker uncontrollably.

"Wwhat?"
Well, look at you. You’ve got one eye, he’s got one horn, you’re both purple and you came out of the sky… So can you play rock and roll music through the horns on your heads?"

Gamzee and Eridan looked at each other and spoke in Alternian.

"I really shouldn’t. I was doing so motherfucking well… Plus, I already sort of motherfucking snapped at him…"

"You wanna hold him while I punch, then?"

"That works."

Nepeta looked up as John ran past, screaming at the top of his lungs, pursued by two angry trolls. She purred. “Aw, they’re getting along! I’m so purroud.”

“Shouldn’t you stop things like this from occurring?” Rose asked, looking worried, and moving to follow her still screaming step-brother. Nepeta joined her as they followed the three boys through the house.

“Nope,” Nepeta said, smiling. “They’re getting along, all is well.”

“Well, they might kill my friend. If that is ‘well’, I’m worried to see your terrible.”

“I don’t think they’ll kill him, they’re just teasing! Becoming furrends is so much fun.” Nepeta’s smile didn’t waver.

“Ow! OWW! Stop that!” John tried and failed to break the armlock Gamzee was holding him in. “That actually really hurts!”

“Not my motherfucking fault your species is squishy!” Gamzee cackled.

Eridan stopped jabbing his knuckles into John’s ribs and poked curiously at his face. “Hey, they really are. C’mon, you’re gotta see!”

“Huh.” Gamzee pinched John’s cheek and ruffled his hair. “Well, that’s weird. Hey, kittysis, come check this out!”

“Okay, guys, getting creepy here!”

Nepeta walked over and started poking her finger against John’s cheek. “Oh wow! You’re all fleshy. I mean, I have a round face, but you’re all really squishy.” She poked down to his stomach. “Ohh! It’s all soft!”

“Goddammit, I am not a squeaky toy! Rose, are you taking photos?!”

“You’re my brother now, I’m required by law to have at least one embarrassing photo of you.”

~~~

"This movie is stupid!"

John groaned and paused the DVD. “Terezi, we’re like five minutes into it, how can you hate it already?"

"Because it’s confusing!” Terezi pointed at the screen. "See, they say it’s illegal for humans to fight in public and kill other humans. But he did that, and they didn’t kill him?"
John laughed, then realised she was serious and shut up very quickly. All the humans turned to stare at her, when they remembered that wouldn’t get them any type of answer they looked around to the other trolls.

“What? We told you troll society is tough,” Vriska said with a shrug.

“I didn’t realize it extended to ‘murder all lawbreakers’.”

“Well, not all of them get executed…” Terezi paused and decided to break the information slightly more gently. Humans were really sensitive to things like that. “It’s just not wise for trolls to break the law, any part of it. Most of them get executed, some of them get tortured then executed. Some just get tortured. Some get stripped of everything and become laborers. But that last one only happens in certain circumstances.”

“That ‘just getting tortured’ should be understood as most trolls die under the torture so it might as well be execution,” Karkat pointed out.

“Well, you can get fines and tickets too! It’s not all execution. Just most of it is.” Terezi sighed. “The legal system is really hard though. I mean if the Empire wants them dead they don’t make it to court, in jail you can duck out and re-assimilate to society before you even see trial if they can’t make a case. I mean, His Honorable Tyranny doesn’t like to hear boring cases.”

“Yes, but if you don’t get out of jail or into trial beforehand you end up waiting in prison for at most ten sweeps, if you can survive that long.”

“What happens at ten sweeps?”

“You get murdered publicly.”

“You guys should really think of ways to solve your problems other than murder.”

“It’s blessed murder though. They get handed over to the Tents as sacrifice,” Gamzee muttered. “Keep jails cleans and gets subjugs blood. Without them turning on the ranks or the Empire.”

“That sounds just lovely.” Rose frowned. “Remind me not to get locked up abroad there.”

“Different laws, technically you’d fall under colonist law… And ignore Gamzee’s religious bullshit, it’s stupid.” Terezi nodded, hoping the change in subject would stop the humans from asking about colonist law. It was worse.

They went through the movie, each criminal introduced, all of the viewers heard Terezi’s sentence in Alternian terms, and since they saw trial they’d all be dead. Including Poe, which John had to explain wasn’t a good thing. He was honest, just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Terezi pointed out not many of them would have gone to jail, but she was working under the assumption that they did their crimes to highbloods and they were lowbloods. If it were a highblood it wouldn’t even be talked about, a midblood might get a tap on the wrist. John scooted away as subtly as possible from the group.

“Wait, pause it again… I think my translator isn’t working right. What are they saying that guy with the tattoos did?”

The humans were silent for a moment, until Dave muttered “And I thought the conversation about the location of Ampora’s dick was awkward.”

“No it’th working right, it’s juth there ithn’t a word in the dictionary for it.” The humans looked
between each other, thinking that they really should elect one of them to explain things to the trolls full-time. The trolls had elected Aradia, it would make moments like this a lot easier.

“Sexual assault,” Rose said slowly. “That’s what he did.”

“And that is?” Terezi said looking in Rose’s general direction, though off by a few inches.

Rose recited the definition as if reading from a dictionary, her needles still working. “A rapist; one who commits rape. Rape; to force another into unwanted sexual activity. Widely considered to be one of the worst things one human can do to another. I apologise for my terse tone, but this is not a conversation I foresaw, and it’s a touchy subject, particularly to women. I’ve known people it happened to, and the effects are… lasting and unpleasant.”

Vriska’s eyebrows raised. “Humans need a word for that? Damn, and I was starting to think your society was all nice and fluffy, I didn’t figure it even happened here.”

“Oh, it does,” Rose said, clicking her needles viciously. “Not that anyone who would do such a thing deserves to be called ‘human’. I’m sorry our culture isn’t quite as utopian as you expected, everywhere has its dark side.”

"Trolls don’t even have a word for that?" Jade asked. “That must be awful. If it happens you can’t even talk about it?”

"Uh,” Karkat said slowly. “We sort of do, but it’s not so much a word as it is a… more patronising-sounding pronunciation of the word for the consensual version.” His throat released two sequences of weird growling sounds. “See? I guess that’s why the translation didn’t come through right.”

"And that tells us everything we need to know," Dave said, shifting away from the trolls.

"Hey, don’t get me wrong, it’s not like we approve of it! Most trolls think it’s sick, or at least kind of unfair, but it’s… not technically illegal under most circumstances. That’s one of the reasons we want Feferi in power, so she can fix that.”

“Trolls,” Aradia said softly, “do not see violence as a bad thing. We see it as selective breeding. For instance, if you attack a troll and kill them, you got rid of a weak link in our genetic code. If they kill you, you are a weak link in the species. Most trolls don’t just beat someone up. If they do that’s romance, or friendship. Most platonic rivalries will just turn into murder.”

“That’s terribly comforting,” Rose said with a sigh.

“The only time… doing that… would really get a troll in deep shit is if it was a lowblood attacking a highblood. Then if they succeeded the highblood would be punished too, for letting them step out of their place.” Karkat glared at Equius throughout his speech, as if daring him to say anything, but the big troll remained silent. “Gamzee, you’re breaking my hand.”

“Maybe this movie was a bad idea?” Tavros said, looking up at Gamzee and offering his own hand.

“Aw, guys, I’m sorry,” John mumbled. “I didn’t know it’d upset you, it’s not like anything graphic happens onscreen… well, like that, I mean, there are a few deaths, but… Would you rather watch something else?”

“No,” Gamzee hissed between his teeth. “It’s alright. I… We, just, wasn’t expecting any of this. Mind if I all get myself something to drink?”

“No, go on ahead,” Rose said, watching Gamzee carefully. “Don’t touch the liquor cabinet.”
“I wasn’t gonna.” Gamzee stalked off towards the kitchen. Karkat watched him, wondering if he should go after him. He hadn’t expected that it would come up here. In Alternian media it wasn’t even represented, but the humans seemed very nonchalant about the whole thing. Maybe one day Karkat would ask about it. He caught Rose looking between him and the kitchen. Karkat looked back towards the movie, still wondering if he should go comfort Gamzee.

Dave looked at the DVD stack. “Okay, guess this means Game of Thrones is a bad idea… Everyone happy if I swap it for Finding Nemo?”

“You don’t have to change it,” Karkat said. “We’ll watch this movie. Then we can see about other movies. Also, this is a completely honest question, what is a ‘game of thrones’?”

“Well,” Rose said. “In a game of thrones, you win or you die.”

“That doesn’t sound like it would be too bad, pretty normal actually,” Terezi said. “Sort of like home sweet home.”

Feferi laughed. “It does, doesn’t it?”

Gamzee returned with a beaker of water, the movie played, and with each scene that passed the trolls asked fewer questions, getting a hang of the human-culture thing, as well as figuring out the difference between both groups, letting the movie have human terms and human traditions, though at points they couldn’t help but point out some of their alien flair.

“See, if this had been under Alternian law, they couldn’t have taken over the plane, they’d be dead.”

“How is everyone so easily obsessed with this guy? He’s not much to remark about. Then again he couldn’t even keep his involvement covert.”

“Why is that guy in a mask? Human teeth are so blunt.”

“No one is complaining that this dude isn’t working? Who died and made him plane-empress?”

Despite the anecdotes and the occasional explanation, the humans were enjoying watching the trolls’ reactions a lot, seeing their society through new eyes. For a brief moment Dave lamented that they couldn’t watch a troll movie, curious to see what it was like. Then he imagined an hour and a half of insect screeches, and decided against it. He wondered what they sounded like to the trolls. He’d have to ask eventually.

He looked over at Rose who was busy knitting, not really watching the movie, but the trolls instead. She caught him looking and smiled a bit, then held up the long but thin tubes she was knitting. Dave cocked his head to the side, and watched her mouth some words, he shook his head, and when she did it again she moved her mouth slower. “Horn cozies”. He didn’t think it was the right time to laugh. This was the part where shit was hitting the fan and insulin guy was near death and showing he was a good guy in trying to rescue the officer from stupid-crazy tattoo guy.

Rose suddenly jerked her head away and looked over towards the trolls. Dave tried to follow her line of sight but ended up just looking at the back of Karkat’s head and stiff posture. Dave shrugged and watched the movie again. Rose’s eyes fixed on the statue like frame of both Gamzee and Karkat. She held her breath, hoping to hear something.

Then it was gone; as suddenly as it came the stiff posture and reaction was gone, vanished behind a veneer of calm acceptance. She clicked her needles together and looked up at the screen; this was the dénouement and she was just waiting for John to start reciting lines. John was too entranced by the movie to even glance over at Jade and Eridan who were miming firing guns with John’s pillow as
the target. Rose smiled briefly, and resumed knitting.

All of the trolls cheered up noticeably during the fight and explosion scenes, and John, Jade, and Dave thought nothing more of Gamzee’s reaction.
Dr Lalonde had of course paid for express shipping for Gamzee’s new clubs, so it had only taken a couple of days for them to arrive. The troll’s eyes had lit up as he opened the box at the breakfast table, in the nearest thing to a happy expression the humans had ever seen on his face, and he had hurried outside to practice. The weather being pleasant, everyone had followed him outside, bringing their food for an impromptu picnic.

“Hey, you’re really good with those things!” Jade said, watching the coloured blurs.

“Aw, thanks! Though I’m not all that great,” Gamzee said, spinning one club into the air and catching it, then the other. “The real motherfucking experts can fight with three at once. I never got that far.”

“Don’t get too down about it, even one can crush a skull,” Karkat said, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl at Dr Lalonde’s elbow. “Think fast!”

The apple flew at Gamzee’s head, and smashed to pieces between the two clubs in the blink of an eye. Gamzee even managed to catch a chunk in his mouth; he swallowed, and gave Karkat a quick hand-motion which was apparently the troll answer to a thumbs-up.

“See?”

“Oh,” Jade said. “I don’t know if I should be impressed or terrified.”

“I like impressed better. I’d never do all nothing to hurt you little things. Ain’t in me to hurt nice aliens. Ain’t really in me to hurt nice-anyone.”

“Do all of you have ridiculous proficiency with weapons? I understand that your culture is very militaristic but among human groups usually there are just a few weapons in use. Like spear, bow, and sword.”

Karkat nodded. “Our traditional weapons depend on caste and branch. Like Archeradicators use bows and arrows. Equius was part of that. Threshecutioner use sickles, like me. Subjugglators prefer blunt trauma weapons. Gamzee was part of them. Even then, you have differences, some Archeradicators prefer other distance weapons. But traditionally it’s a bow and arrow. It doesn’t make sense to have just a few standard weapons, everyone has skills.”

“Some weapons though are only open based on caste, like you’d rarely see someone below midblood training with a bow and arrow. You might, but it’s unlikely. Archery is sort of a highblood thing,” Vriska said between bites. “That’s not so much Empire rule as finances, buying the stuff for it is expensive, and it’s difficult to make one properly on Alternia. One that the Conscription officers would take seriously.”

“Not to mention arrows need to be constantly restocked,” Equius pointed out, after swallowing the last of his third banana.

"So do the bows, if it’s you that’s using them," Vriska said.

"It’s not my fault that the wood isn’t durable enough! I did try making a metal bow once, but it didn’t work terribly well." Equius saw the humans’ quizzical expressions. "I fear I am simply too strong to use a bow in a normal manner. My control is getting better, but even a slight slip can mean a breakage."
"Hm." Rose clacked her knitting needles thoughtfully. "Have you considered trying a crossbow of some kind? That way the string would be held in position until you were ready to fire, and there would be less risk of your hand slipping in the process."

"Oh hell yeah, maybe build some kind of hand-carried siege weapon like that troll in Discworld!" John suggested, practically bouncing with joy at the idea. "Different kind of troll, but same idea…"

"Yes," said Rose, clearly regretting her suggestion. "If you do make a Piecemaker of your own, please make sure you practice by aiming it away from the house."

"Pardon?" Equius asked slowly. "I’m afraid I don’t understand the reference. If it really is an option you might wish to explain it in further detail. Unless this is some type of joke. Personally, I prefer the bows in their natural state. I’m surprised I managed to keep myself contained long enough to get into the division, versus becoming a ruffiannihilator. With my strength it was almost planned that I’d go there. However I am always looking for suggestions so I do not continue to break my bows."

"Okay…” John sketched out a very rough shape in the dirt. "The thing I was talking about is a really, really huge crossbow which needs as much strength as you have to pull at all, not to mention carry. And the guy who uses it modified it to fire a whole sheaf of arrows at once, and the air friction tends to make them all catch fire when he shoots. Don’t know if that’s your kind of thing, but I thought it was freaking awesome, and it’d be a bit less easily damaged than something that’s basically a stick."

"I object in the extreme to the description of my caste’s traditional weapon as ‘basically a stick’.” Equius looked at the diagram. "Hm. Maybe I could put one of these things together, though… Archery and mechanics, two excellent things, but will the combination be worth the sum of the parts? This requires thought.” He tapped his claws together, then scrawled a few more lines on the diagram. "Hmm.”

Without warning, the club came flying at Equius’ head. He reached up and caught it between thumb and forefinger, the weapon quivering from the impact, an inch away from his eye. His lip quirked. "You’re pretty good, Makara. But so am I."

"Can’t blame me all up for trying.” Gamzee shrugged, holding out his hand so he could get the club back. Equius paused for a moment before relenting. “Good to keep your reflexes up.”

“I admit this may seem a bit out of place, but I am interested in how your actual training went. Not any of the other satellite issues that happened. Did you learn much, or really anything?”

“Did learn quite a bit, before everything got difficult. You saying you’d like to strife, or you just asking because this is a round about way to be making with cruelty? If it’s the second one, you’re being all kinds of an asshole and you might get a strife anyway.”

“Just checking whether you’ll have a chance of not dying. But if you want to strife, I’m willing.”

“Bad idea, guys, bad idea,” Karkat hissed. “Remember what happened last time?”

“I wouldn’t be too harsh on him. No psychics, promise.”

“I would quite enjoy beating you up, for that one time I never got the opportunity to.”

“You still bitter? It got fixed all kind of fast. You can’t keep holding on to resolved problems so long. Ain’t good for the bloodpusher.”

“Guys, please!” Tavros stood up, equipping his lance, and stammered out “I-I’ll strife with either of
you, if you want.”

Equius raised an eyebrow. “Well, it can only do us all good to practice. I’ll take up your offer, Nitram.” He stood up, the sunlight glinting on his blue-sheened skin, and flexed his terrifyingly well-developed arms. Tavros wobbled on his metal legs as he assumed a fighting stance, his wings suddenly looking like a very big and delicate target.

“Oh, I can’t watch!” Jade murmured, pressing her knuckles to her mouth. Tinkerbull fluttered over and settled in her lap, and her fingers worked nervously through his fur.

“Aw, c’mon, Jade, they’re friends, they’re not really going to kill each other,” John chuckled nervously. “Right?”

“Nobody’s going to be killed, it’s just a practice bout,” Equius said. “Nitram’s not that hopeless.”

“Hey!” Tavros made a jabbing motion with his lance in the direction of Equius’ head. The bigger troll ducked to the side, the blow lightly skimming his shoulder, and returned a swing which Tavros nearly fell over backwards trying to avoid.

“See, this is your problem, Nitram! You have speed and strength, but you panic!” Another blow which Tavros barely dodged, another parry as the lance swung. “You must use more force! More confidence!”

“I’m trying!”

“For goodness’ sake, Nitram, does Makara only pity you because you’re the only thing more pathetic than he is?”

Tavros paused for a moment, looking at Equius, before his teeth pressed against each other. It wasn’t exactly a snarl or anything close to a growl. Tavros swung the side of his lance, thudding it against Equius’s ribs, and the taller troll let out a huff. It wasn’t the appropriate way to use a lance, but it seemed no less effective.

Equius moved to return the blow, and Tavros’ legs creaked slightly as he dodged out of the way. Equius spun to right the trajectory error, only to find air where his fist landed. It took Equius a moment to reassess just where Tavros had moved to, when the butt of a lance rammed against the upper part of his back. Tavros’ feet found the ground again, and he was swinging the lance once more at Equius, who had righted himself to face the smaller troll.

“We’re not pathetic,” Tavros said, his voice as close to anger as any of the trolls had ever heard it. “I just didn’t want to hurt you.” Equius grabbed the tip of the lance, intending to block off Tavros’ opportunity to land another attack. There was a dull thud, laced with the slight crunch of metal as Tavros’ foot connected with Equius’ shin. “Or myself.”

Equius swung and once again Tavros was in the air, one of the feet on his metal legs crumpled and useless, but now he was higher than Equius could reach without jumping. “That’s your problem!” Tavros said. “You don’t think before you, uhh, speak. I might be nervous, but at least I don’t go barreling in.”

“I don’t go barreling in.” Equius was still, watching Tavros carefully. “I do generally like to have a plan.”

“I know, but when push comes to, uhh, shove you don’t like changing it. You’re inflexible.” Tavros nodded. “If I stay up here, I could grab, uhhm, rocks and throw them at you, what would you do?”
“If this were not practice, I would pull my bow out and fire.”

“You don’t have your bow, only your strength,” Tavros pointed out. “I have my lance and my height. And I’m, uhh, faster than you. So, what do you do?” Tavros paused. “Nothing, because you’re powerless here, you could jump, but you couldn’t reach me, I fly faster… and uhh, you could try throwing things at me, but you’d miss.”

“Forgive me, Nitram. I don’t understand where all this is coming from.”

“Scary, isn’t it?” Tavros said, settling his hand holding the lance. “Being totally, uhh, powerless. And not, uhh, knowing what to do next? Maybe… well, you could talk to Eridan, he’s got a distance weapon. Assuming of course that he’d help you. Or maybe one of our other friends.”

“Ah, I see.” Equius nodded. “This won’t work, Nitram, I learned my lesson.”

“No, I know, but I wanted to let you feel it.” Tavros nodded, his hand holding the lance steady. His words were quickly swapping into Alternian; the humans couldn’t follow much, but still they watched the match. “I wanted you to know what it was like to be powerless. Eridan’s been there, but you haven’t. I don’t want to, uhh, hear you ever say there had to be something that could have been done. That the reaction is unjustified. Does this make you pathetic, that you can’t take me down?”

“You’re speaking to me in Alternian in front of the humans. Karkat will be angry. And no, I told you I understand your point. The lesson is learned.” Equius began to crouch, as if to jump.

“Is it?” Tavros said, pointing his lance at Equius. “Because, I just, uhh, told you that isn’t going to work. Or do you want to really know what it’s like to fail in the eyes of your friends? To lose yourself to your blood. To be lost among a storm and be alone. Truly and utterly alone. You of all the other trolls should understand him. Understand him like I do. Like Karkat does. All three of us spoke to him equally, the others avoided him. Nepeta did so on your orders, and had to sneak behind your back to talk to him.”

“I’m afraid we are not all one and the same, Nitram.” Equius leaped in the air, moving up quickly, and soon he was level with Tavros, who flitted out of reaching distance moments before. Recalculating the fall left Equius vulnerable and Taros saw his chance. The point of the lance was disregarded and the side of it came crashing down against the blueblood’s diaphragm, knocking the wind out of him, making Equius land with a thud on the ground, a small hole formed where he fell.

He was gasping for breath when Tavros landed on his back, putting the tip of the lance at the back of Equius’ neck. The blueblood tried to shake him off and instead Tavros hovered just above him, the tip still pressing into skin.

“And now you’ve fought, and you’ve knelt, and now you’ve been powerless. Penance paid.” Tavros pulled the lance away. “Don’t ever say things like that again.”

“Got it.” Equius coughed a few times. “Are you sure you can’t feel black? Because, ah, your manner just now…”

“I prefer to say that I ‘don’t’ feel black, and I don’t hate you, Equius. I only hated what you said. I think we could be, uhh, friends, if you thought we could. Just, you know, don’t say such horrible things, about my other friends, again.”

“You’re a very strange troll, Nitram. Still, I don’t find myself able to hate you now either.” Equius coughed again and looked up at the brownblooded troll, who was offering his hand. Tavros let out a little smile, his lance already gone, ready to put the fight by the wayside. Equius looked up at him
and slowly extended his own hand. He didn’t need help up, but it was the symbol that mattered.

Only Karkat heard Gamzee’s mutter of “Well, fuck. Now I need a towel.”

~~~

“Tav?”

“Yeah?”

“I think…” Gamzee cleared his throat and shuffled his feet. “I think I wanna hug you.”

Tavros smiled, not letting himself blush too much. Gamzee wasn’t subtle, but this was a whole new level of outright. Seeing as the taller troll had been so avoidant of everything lately it wasn’t hard to feel lucky that he wanted anything to do with him. He outstretched his arms a little bit, before Gamzee moved and wrapped his arms around Tavros’ shoulders, pulling him into an awkward - only because of the wings - hug.

“Is this okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” Gamzee sounded a little surprised. “You’re so warm.”

“Uhh, yeah, brownbloods are.” Tavros tried to shift them into a better position. “Uhh, you know, Gamzee, I sort of was thinking over what you said a while back. And, um, before conscription I wasn’t sure, and then you got hurt and needed space, and then you went weird and, okay, I was really scared. But you seem a lot calmer now, Karkat’s been really good for you and Nepeta and Eridan seem to be helping a lot. So, uhh, if it won’t freak you out too much…”

Gamzee raised an eyebrow, pulling back so he could look at Tavros. “What has been sticking in your pan, bro? Or what do you want to direct at me to make with answers?”

Tavros would have shifted awkwardly, or done something to try to ease the latent worry he had. This could go one of two ways, either it could be wonderful or terrible. Though Tavros supposed most things were like that. The middle ground had been abandoned for the vast majority of their life.

“Um. I don’t know if this can go anywhere at the moment, or if it should, but I think, uhh, I should at least tell you. I…” Tavros’ face was orange. “Are you still flushed for me?”

Gamzee jerked backwards and leaned away, not letting go, looking shocked. “Tav, Tav, no! I mean, yes, but, no, I…” He started to shake. “I can’t.”

“Oh, no, Gamzee, I don’t mean… you don’t have to do anything! Not ever, if you don’t want to! I just…”

“That’s not what I mean. I know you’d never make me, you’d never hurt anyone… That’s the thing, though. You’re too good to me. I don’t deserve your motherfucking pity.” Purple tears landed on Tavros’ shirt. “I’m not worth your time.”

“Uhh, Gamzee? I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but… I think I’m the one who gets to decide who’s worth my time.”

“It’s not that you don’t, it’s just that, see, if you knew what I’m in the knowing of your pity would be replaced with disgust. I don’t want that, I’d rather you get all kinds of joy from someone worth your blessed pity. I don’t want to turn around and be something that makes you all broken in the end. I can’t be doing that.”
“Um.” Tavros tried to find words. “Okay, just a thought here. If whatever it is that’s upsetting you happened to me instead, would you think less of me?”

“… If I didn’t know what it was motherfucking like, I probably would have.”

“But you do know what it’s like - sorry, not meaning to imply that’s a good thing, but you know what I mean.”

“I do… I won’t say that it’s not for nothing on my part. I don’t want you to find out and come back saying it’s all kind of bad. I’d rather stay friends. I don’t want you end up platonically hating me.”

“I don’t think I can, Gamzee. I, uh, get it. I won’t judge you based on almost anything other than your own deeds. It’s not right for me to judge you based on anything that was out of your control. It’s not, uhh, fair to blame you for the mistakes of other trolls.”

Everything in Gamzee’s mind screamed at him to walk away. Tavros didn’t deserve to get dragged into this, and it would only hurt worse when it ended. He cursed himself for his weakness as his lips brushed Tavros’ face.

Both of them almost jumped out of their skins as the back door opened, and they looked up to see Dave entering the kitchen. He looked them over, pokerfaced but somehow getting across that he knew exactly what they were up to, and said “Don’t mind me.”

Tavros turned orange. Gamzee mentally cursed the fact that he’d chosen to do this in the kitchen, and stubbornly kissed him again. He could feel the smaller troll smile, before there was a pause, a moment of both of them being still before Tavros gave him a little squeeze. Gamzee pulled his head back and looked at the smaller troll for only a moment, before Tavros leaned forward, moving up to the tips of his toes and gave Gamzee a little nuzzle on his cheek.

“I got you.” Tavros said simply. “And, uh, you got me too.”

Dave closed the fridge door and frowned. “Guys, seriously, I can’t eat with spacebug PDA going on three yards away. Bologna sandwiches do not go well with that much sugar.”

“Shut up,” Gamzee said without looking up. “See, Tav, this is why doorways are sometimes a good thing. Means no motherfucking squishy pink monkeys listening in.” Tavros giggled.

Dave sighed, pulled his phone from his pocket, and turned on a loud, irritating song.

“PEANUT BUTTER JELLY TIME-”

“‘Scuse me, Tav.” Gamzee untangled one arm, picked up the TV remote, and hurled it at Dave’s head. It impacted with a dull thud and clattered to the ground. Dave dropped his phone and immediately moved to grab the side of his head. He opened his mouth, hissing and cursing at the quite sudden pain. Setting his sandwich on one of the counters, he checked to make sure his head wasn’t bleeding, and once he knew he was fine, he snatched up his phone and checked it for damage with equal care.

“Is this how you solve all your problems? Thoughtless violence? I mean really, what the hell.”

“Usually, yep.”

“Gamzee, that wasn’t nice,” Tavros said with a frown. “I’m not taking it back, but I did say I, uhh, started to like you more when you stopped being so violent. You’re kind of making this difficult.”
“Sorry, just… Sometimes I do things before I think, and the first thought that all be moving is usually throwing something. I’ll try not to do it again… But you got to admit he was being all kinds of insensitive.”

“Yeah, okay, that was pretty rude,” Tavros said, looking at Dave. “Can’t you just take your food somewhere else?”

“Hey, I was living here before you were!”

“Well, yes, but uhh, we were here first, and this is sort of private. It’s, umm, kind of your own fault your sandwich is too sweet. There is also a place to dine properly, so, uhh, you could go there.”

“You’re in the kitchen, kitchens are where humans make food. I made myself a sandwich. And I did not need to see that.”

“Well then, motherfucker, you can make at eating elsewhere.”

“Fine, fine. Sheesh.” Dave took a bite of his sandwich and scowled. “Seriously, won’t Karkat be pissed about you two getting kissy-faced?”

Gamzee’s eyes widened. “Karkat! Of course, we gotta tell him, he’s gonna be mad he missed it!” He jumped up, grabbed Tavros’ hand, and dragged the winged troll out the front door. “Karbro, I got good news!”

Dave shook his head. A house full of polyamorous aliens. Sounded like a setup to a bad porn movie now, instead of a bad sci-fi movie. Still, if it applied to all of them maybe he’d see if one of the girls wanted to hang out later. Terezi seemed like fun…

~~~

Eridan leaned around the bathroom door, causing John to jump and nearly fall off his bed. “So, uh, Egbert human. You busy?”

John cursed as the distraction caused him to allow his video game opponent to get a shot in. The annoying “Game Over” music played, and he glared up at Eridan, closing his laptop. “What is it? If this is about borrowing my shoelaces again, I keep telling you, they wouldn’t keep breaking if you didn’t keep pulling them so tight. What, are you afraid of losing your shoes or something?”

“… Somefin like that.”

"Why are you blushing?"

"Newer mind. I wwas just wwondering if you’d like to talk or somefin.” Eridan shrugged. “It’s not about shoelaces. Just kind of talk, you knoww, get to knoww each other and all that sort of stuff…”

“Isn’t that what we’ve all already been doing?”

“Wwell, I wwas thinkin’ a bit more one-on-one, sort of thing,” Eridan mumbled, blushing slightly. “You knoww, get talkin’, play some games… maybe build a pile if things go right…”

“Umm… Are you hitting on me again? Like is building a pile some sort of alien innuendo?” John’s eyes widened and he backed up against the wall. “Oh my god! You’re going to drag me into your freaky alien nest and lay eggs in my brain!”

“No! No, no. I really mean just talk, one-on-one, get to knoww each other better.” Eridan smiled,
trying his best to not come on terribly strong, though he had a feeling he was. John was still looking confused.

“I guess we can. Anything in particular you wanted to talk about?”

“I’ve been curious, what’s it like growing up on Earth. I mean, what do little humans do?” Eridan slowly moved over towards John and didn’t sit on the bed; instead he found a place on the floor. John really wished that trolls didn’t have a thing against beds, because sitting on it and looking down at Eridan felt really weird. It would have been better if the troll sat next to him, but he didn’t want to offend him by asking him to sit on it, knowing what it meant.

“Eridan,” John said, and cleared his throat. “This isn’t like a offer or anything, it’s just weird to sit on the bed and look down at you. Do you think you could suspend the weird trolls-only-use-beds-for-other-activities thing and sit up here with me? Just to talk, nothing else. I’m not like asking you to do anything more.” Eridan’s face was nearly violet once John finished. John almost felt bad about it, but part of being in a new culture was experiencing it as it was meant to be experienced. At least that’s what Jade always told him, so he thought it should apply to the trolls as well. “If you’re too uncomfortable with it I could move to the floor, but that would hurt after a while. I just thought we could both be a bit more… God, this is not coming out right. I just mean it would be more comfortable for conversation then sitting on the floor.”

Eridan giggled. “Aww, you’re so thoughtful.” He stood up slowly and looked at the bed suspiciously. But he figured, while he was here, he might as well try out their culture. He sat down beside John and settled slowly, giggled, and said “You knoww, I fell foul of some gossips and there were a lot of rumours going round about wweird shit I did back wwith the fleet, but I don’t think any of ‘em wwould believe I had a feelings jam on a bed.”

“So,” John said, obviously feeling slightly awkward. “What did you want to talk about?” He handed Eridan one of the pillows, and the troll hugged it nervously.

“Wwhatever, really. Wwhat’s it like, being a human wwriggler?”

John shrugged. “That’s kind of a difficult question to answer, I mean, is there anything in particular you want to know? I mean, I was born, and then my dad raised me, and I grew up, went to school. Made friends, you know, normal stuff.”

“Your dad’s like your lusus-ancestor thing, right?” Eridan asked, and looked thoughtful at John’s nod. “Wwhat’s he like? Mine’s a skyhorse.”

“Umm.” John didn’t know how to respond to that, but he tried to go with it. “Mine’s a bit overbearing, not in a bad way. It’s just when my mom died, he sort of knew he’d have to take on the whole role of both parents. He wants me to succeed and do well, but he can be a little weird sometimes… He collects clown dolls and other clown stuff, in general he’s a bit odd… Uh, what’s your skyhorse like?”

"Oh, he’s fuckin’ awsome. Wwhen I wwas still small enough I’d ride on him and wwe’d fly around and go wwhale-hunting!” Eridan’s eye lit up and he waved his hands around, trying to describe the joys of flight with gestures when words failed him. "My job wwas to feed Fef’s lusus - the great Kraken Gl'bgota, Speaker of the Wast Glub, if she wwasn’t fed she’d destroy the wworld. I kept her fed for swweeps," he said proudly. "And sometimes Skyhorsedad and I wwould just fly around for the fun of it. Sometimes wwe saw thunderstorms from abowe! I miss those days. Hope he’s okay back on Alternia.” He sighed, and looked sideways at John. "You knoww, I think he’d really like you. Maybe some day wwe can see Alternia again and I’ll introduce you?"
“Yeah, that would be pretty cool! My dad’s coming up here soon, maybe you’ll meet him. I don’t know how he’d react, since aliens are new to us and all, but I think he’d be pretty cool with meeting all of you…” Eridan shifted closer to him, and he couldn’t help but feel even more uncomfortable. The setup for this conversation was awkward enough, let alone the way Eridan was acting. John sighed. This was going to be tricky. “Um, Eridan, I don’t mean to upset you or anything, but this weird way you’re acting… do you have a crush on me or something?”

Eridan looked down. “… Maybe? No? Yes? Which answer are you looking for?”

“Well, I’m sorry, but if the answer is ‘yes’ then it’s not gonna work out. I mean, I’m really flattered and all, but you’re kind of weirding me out, and anyway I’m not gay. Or bi. Sorry.”

“What does that mean?” Eridan asked slowly.

“That means I’m not attracted to men, I like women, for dating, and marrying and stuff…”

“Oh, oh, no this isn’t… I mean I’m not trying for that. That isn’t what this is about.”

“If you say so, but it does kind of seem like you’re flirting, and I don’t want to give you the wrong impression. I don’t mind being friends, but that’s about as far as this is going to go… Okay?”

“Wait. You really think I’m tryin’ to get in your pants?”

“Uh, I’m okay with it. You don’t have to pretend you didn’t say anything! I support you and everything, I’m just, you know, not that way. Why, would it have got you in trouble on your planet?”

“Uh, no, trolls don’t really make a distinction there…” Eridan clenched his fists. “‘Scuse me, I need to go and have a talk with my shipmates.”

“You said ‘talk’ like you meant ‘murder’. Please don’t hurt anyone?”

“Oh, sure, you say you’re not interested and then you try to pacify me anyway!” Eridan glubbed, tears welling up in his eye. “Well, fuck you too, Egbert!” He stomped out, leaving John blinking at the door. He hurried out after him, just in time to see Eridan disappearing towards the basement.

“Guys, guys!” John said worriedly, running down the stairs. Dave, Jade, and Rose were sitting in front of the TV, and looked up as they heard him. “I think Eridan’s in love with me! What do I do?”

“Why, did he mistake you for a princess?”

“Not funny, Dave.”
Chapter 37

Eridan stormed into the basement and shouted “Okay, wwhich of you fuckers has been talkin’ to Egbert?”

"Uhh, all of us have talked to him. About what, specifically?”

“About me, wwhat else?”

Kanaya looked up from her sewing and frowned. “Why would we be talking to him about you? At least I don’t imagine anyone would be talking about you negatively to him, if that’s what you’re concerned about - well, possibly, but certainly not to the degree by which your reaction would be justified.”

“Indeed,” said Equius, nodding. “Contrary to what you may believe, we do have more important things to discuss than you.”

“Oh ha fuckin’ ha. Someone’s been tellin’ him I pail in the pale. Seriously, guys, that is not somefin you can go round saying about someone. I’we heard rumours about me havin’ done pretty much eweryfin, but that one’s neww, and it’s not funny.” He glared at Equius, who gaped back at him.

"Why are you looking at me? I don’t want to spend any more time contemplating your pailing behaviour than I have to! I already had to listen to Nepeta discuss it!”

"Wwhy the hell did my sex life come up in your feelings jams?”

"Because she didn’t know what to say to you about it. For the record, neither did I. I told her to talk to Nitram.”

"Great, my bulge is an endless source of fuckin’ fascination, ain’t it? Back on topic, wwho’s been spreading those rumors? He picked up I wwas pale-mackin’ on him and he babbled somefin about he couldn’t ‘cause of his female fetish, I asked wwhat he meant and he said it meant he didn’t wwanna fuck me!”

“Maybe you were coming on a little strong?” Kanaya asked. “Perhaps he mistook your pale advances for flushed ones.”

“There is no way he could have thought they were anythin’ else other than pale. So who has been spreadin’ lies about my pailing habits?” Eridan’s eyes roved over the room.

“Don’t you even stop your lookspheres at me, fishbro. I ain’t one to talk about pailing in any way shape or form. Especially pailing in that way. You carry on with your little look around and leave me outta it.”

“I don’t honestly know who would think that would be casual conversation with the humans,” Karkat said with a shrug. “Nice to meet you. Let’s talk about sex, how does that sound?” Karkat suddenly looked up and his eyes fixed over towards a corner. Eridan followed his line of sight.

“Why are you looking at me?” Vriska sounded defensive. “I didn’t mention anything about your… habits to them.”

“Well, you did seem a little on the… pink side for the John human,” Kanaya said, frowning. “And sabotage is something of a thing for you. No offense meant.”
“Hey, that lasted like five minutes, okay?” Vriska scowled, a blue tint rising in her face.

Terezi cackled and sniffed. “I smell blueberry bubblegum. Are your thoughts on him turning more candy-apple than cherry-blossom?”

“Huh?… What? No!”

“What about you?” Eridan said, pointing accusingly at Terezi.

“Hey, I’m not too interested in Mr Blue Raspberry. I spoke to him maybe twice, I’ve been spending all my time with Dave.” Terezi licked her lips. “Never thought I’d find another set of cherry-flavour eyes.”

“Ewwwww. So, wwhat, you expect me to believe my reputation magically preceded me to an entire neww fuckin’ planet?”

“Okay, there’s one way to settle this,” Nepeta said, standing up and raising her hands. “We should go and ask John. Actually we should probably talk to all the humans. I noticed they were giving Karkat and Terezi funny looks and I heard Jade and Rose saying something about whether they should talk to Gamzee about them. Maybe humans just suck at telling the difference between quadrants?”

“Uhh, actually that would make sense,” Tavros said. “We know their senses of smell aren’t very good. Maybe they just can’t pick up the right pheromones? Or something?”

~~~

“Oh, hey, Tavros. What can we do for you?”

“Um, I’m here to talk about Eridan. He’s kind of upset, you know, and he wanted to ask if, umm, he was sending mixed signals.”

John laughed nervously. “No, I think the signal was very clear. I told him, I’m sorry but I’m only interested in girls.”

Tavros nodded. “I see. Well, um, this is a little awkward to ask, but do you only… uhh, I mean, in all your quadrants… Uhh, wow, this is difficult. Well, let’s start with this, Eridan wasn’t making an offer at a flushed relationship with you… So if you’re worried, he’s not going to infringe on your female fetish, unless that extends to all of your, uh, quadrants.”

“My female what extends to all of my what?” John stared at Tavros.

“Well, John,” Dave said, turning to him. “Does your female fetish extend to all of your quadrants?”

“You act like you understand what that means, Dave,” John said slowly. Dave shrugged. “Okay, the ‘female fetish’ bit was obvious, kind of weird way of putting it but anyway… I’m sorry, Tavros, I’m afraid I don’t understand. What are you asking, or saying?”

“Well, uhh, that wasn’t a question, or the question. The question is has any of our group spread any rumors about Eridan?” The humans stared at him, and at the other trolls behind him. “That’s the actual question, the other was, well, just a statement.”

“What kind of rumors?” Dave asked, leaning forward. “I haven’t heard them. Come on, John tell us.”
“Umm, not that I know of…” John said slowly. “Well, Vriska called him a douchebag, but I don’t think that counts. It’s just his intentions were pretty obvious, and I wanted to let him know.”

“I don’t pail in the pale, that’s pretty much the most disgustin’ use of that quadrant ewer. I wwant to know who told you I do.”

The humans were silent for several seconds, before Rose decaptchalogued a notebook and pencil with a sigh. “Okay, everyone, sit down, start from the beginning, and this time, let’s all assume that we have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The trolls looked at each other and found seats on the couches or the floor, grabbing cushions Jade thoughtfully handed them. Karkat realised everyone was looking at him, and groaned. “Great, where in my leader’s handbook does it say I have to explain basic reproduction to retarded aliens?”

“That wasn’t nice,” said Tavros. “They aren’t stupid just because they do things differently. I don’t know, maybe it’s normal for humans to do that with their moirails.”

John blinked. “Okay, I’ve heard that word ‘moirail’ before and I thought it was just the alien word for your partner, or boyfriend, or something. Gamzee called Karkat that and Nepeta said Equius was hers and laughed like I’d said something dumb when we asked if he was her brother. Am I missing a difference here?”

“Wait, you’re thinking Karbro’s my matesprit?” Gamzee looked shocked. “What, did we do something to come off as flushed?”

“Ahem!” It was more of a word than a noise from Rose. “Let’s start at the beginning. I am willing to explain the concepts of human romance, if one of you would like to volunteer to explain the concepts troll romance. It might be advantageous for all of us to take a seat and get comfortable.” After a moment of pause, Rose continued. “I’m guessing trolls have more than one way to have a relationship, going by the way you have been talking. Humans have many different types of relationships, however only one of them is what you would call romance.”

“Unless we’re counting bromance,” Dave added in quickly.

“That’s more friendship than romance. We can get more specific later on, this is in general. In human romance, two humans will find each other, then through a series of unconscious actions decided that they are a viable partner based on ideals that they don’t necessarily know or understand right away. They will develop something akin to friendship, and eventually take it to a deeper level. This usually comes with the building of a symbiotic empathy. Both partners in a relationship will go through trials together, and their aptitude at overcoming them builds the relationship. We call the term love, as in ‘I am in love with person A’. However, “love” has a lot of meanings, but this is just talking about romance, not the word love.”

The trolls were staring at her, trying to take it in and make sense of the explanation. Karkat nodded. “Okay… Is that all you have?”

Nepeta was looking at Rose with something akin to horror. “Sorry, go back to that part about how you only have one type of romance?”

“How many?” Jade asked. “You said something about quadrants, does that mean there are four? How does that work?”

“Uhh, yeah, there are four,” Tavros said, nodding. “Except in my case, I guess they’d be trisectors? I don’t know. But that’s complicated so I should tell you later.”
“Well, there are other meanings of the word love, but romantically you would only have one type. So, trolls have four types. I’m curious how that works, how about jealousy?”

“Oh, I was trying to fill one quadrant with many trolls. Other than your ashen quadrant I mean. That’s meant to be filled by three trolls,” Karkat said, counting the numbers on his fingers.

“Sounds kinky,” Dave said with a smirk and a little eyebrow wiggle.

“It’s not a pailing quadrant. Pervert,” Karkat said shortly. “I guess it could be if you had a kink.. but I’m going to shut up now, and I hate myself for bringing that up.”

“Pailing?” John frowned, and thought. “Pailing… pails… wait, is this about why you freaked out when I offered a bucket? You associate buckets with sex or something?”

“Reproductive sex, technically speaking, but in general, yeah. Breeding in the conciliatory quadrants is kind of a no.” Karkat sighed. “Okay, starting from the most basic description in the hopes it’ll find its way into your well-blocked-off thinkpans…” He drew an invisible grid mid-air. “Four quadrants, divided by two factors. There’s redrom and blackrom, and then concupiscent and conciliatory. This might work better if we use examples - Gamzee, Terezi, Vriska, Aradia, Equius, come here.” The trolls in question shuffled over to sit beside him. “Okay, Terezi and I are matesprits. That’s sort of like your idea of romance, but not quite. I thought it was the same because I saw on TV that you use heart shapes to symbolise your romance, same as we do for this.” He held up his hands, index fingertips meeting in a downward point and thumbs curved inwards to make a rough heart shape. “This is the concupiscent redrom quadrant, but we call it ‘flushed’ for convenience.”

John giggled. “Hehehe, you said flush.”

“Says the guy called John,” said Dave, raising his fist for a bump.

“Guys!” Jade snapped. “What are you, five?”

“Thanks, Jade. Back when we were kids, Terezi found out about my blood and for reasons I will never understand she didn’t cull me right there. Instead she told me she pitied me, and I was overwhelmed with pity in turn for her utter lack of common sense in entering a quadrant with a mutant.”

Terezi giggled and ran her tongue along his ear. “Your delicious smell helped, my little strawberry-cherry-candy-apple Karkles.”

“Please, not in front of the aliens.” Karkat pointed to Gamzee. “Now, Gamzee is my moirail.”

“He’s in charge of keeping my motherfucking sense in check. The colder the blood the more prone to getting all twisted up and going crazy. But moirails can be between two warmerbloods or two colderbloods to, depends on the whole way the troll is. He’s my balance, my other half.” Gamzee smiled at Karkat. The shorter troll shook his head.

“Don’t you start either. It’s kind of like friendship, only a whole hell of a lot more. It’s one of the red quadrants, but we call it a pale romance. He and I are like the closest friends ever, but also without him I wouldn’t be sane, and without me he definitely wouldn’t. He ran into some trouble back on Alternia, and he flew off the handle at Equius and Eridan. I understood what happened, and I calmed him down, and we became moirails. This isn’t a quadrant you pail in. It’s a non-sexual quadrant.”

The humans nodded. “Like extreme best friends,” Jade said with a nod. “I think I can sort of understand, I get that it’s more than friends though… I don’t think there is a good human equivalent of that. Sounds like family crossed with a therapist.”
Nepeta really did look horrified at that. “What, nothing? Never at all? Isn’t that…” She hugged herself and mouthed a few meaningless sounds, unable to find an appropriate word, and settled on the clearly-inadequate “…really lonely?” Equius scooped her onto his lap and mopped at his brow, looking ill.

Gamzee nodded, and shuffled closer to Karkat. “How do you deal? I mean, not having a moirail yet is one thing, but if you never will…? Fuck, it really would be like missing half of yourself.”

“Well, we don’t, silly,” Jade said. “We can’t really miss something we don’t have a concept for. And we live in groups anyway, we sort of bounce off everyone around us to stabilise.”

“It sort of reminds me of the Greek system of romance,” Rose said, still jotting down notes. “Eros, agape, ludus, storge, pragma, mania… Types of relationship, I’ll find the more complex details later for those of you not well-read in this area or non-human if you’re interested. Of course the Greeks had quite a few categories, not just four. And moirail-ism would be like agape, so it would be obviously less sexual.”

“Moirallegiance,” Vriska corrected Rose softly. “We mashed your words together to make a new one that fit for our word for it. ‘Allegiance’ for the bond, and we found ‘moira’ is an old word for fate. And ‘matesprit’ was ‘mate’ and ‘esprit’ or ‘spirit’ or whatever the word is.”

“Thank you, Vriska.”

“So, since it’s a form of love, is there like jealousy? Like Terezi gets jealous of Gamzee? Or does that shit not skip over lines?”

“Please, keep your questions to yourself. I’ll open up the floor once I’m done explaining this. Then you can ask, okay?” Karkat said, once again drawing in the air. “Okay that’s the red side of romance. Now we’re going to talk about the black side. There are two black romance quadrants. Kismesissitude and auspiticism. Black and ashen romance respectively.” Karkat took a breath. He knew this concept would be hard to explain to humans; although their media had examples of it it seemed underdeveloped and not something that they were fully comfortable with talking about in public.

“Red, pale, ashen, black,” Rose repeated, drawing a little grid in her notes. “Okay, you’re free to carry on.”

“Terezi and Aradia, unless something’s changed recently, have been in competition for a while to get Vriska—” Karkat pointed, “—in the caliginous, or black, quadrant. Kismesissitude. Basically, it’s a form of hate combined with a strong attraction. This is the other reproductive quadrant.”

“Easy enough to remember, nemeses who kiss,” said John.

“Actually the word we used was ‘kismet’, ” Aradia said. “Again, meaning ‘fate’. Humans have a lot of words for that.”

Dave looked at the blue-blooded girls and his eyebrow twitched. “What, catfight action on tap? Karkat, dude, you are so lucky.”

“Uhh.” Karkat just stared at Dave for a moment. “It’s not exactly like that. At least if that’s what I think you mean. If my translator is picking up that word right. No, it’s not exactly like that. Perhaps one of them could explain it better, the only fulfilling I’ve had in my black — I’m shutting up again. Terezi, Vriska, one of you go on about it.”

“Blackrom is kinda like redrom, but more violent? It’s really hard to explain, but basically you both
hate each other, but not enough to want the other dead. That’s kind of a no-go zone in kinesissticitude, you don’t kill each other, or do anything that would get them killed. You will do things though to make their life a living hell. And hurt them, hurting them is okay. Just no killing.” Vriska proudly held up her robotic arm. “Causing limb or eye loss is fairly extreme, but okay.”

“Black romance isn’t the inverse of red romance,” Terezi continued. “They have a lot of similar points, but the difference is, in flushed romances you feel pity for another troll. In black and ashen, it’s hate.”

“So when you and nubby were getting catty that was your equivalent of flirting?” Dave asked Kanaya.

“Ah, not exactly. I, well, don’t really like boys.” Kanaya’s cheeks tinted green and she looked sideways at Karkat.

“Wouldn’t that be a point in his favour in that case?”

“You know what I mean!” Kanaya sighed. “Is it true that humans are expected to only express interest in the opposite gender, as your television shows have implied? Yes? Well, to a troll there is little difference. All combinations are valid reproductively and socially, and preferences one way or the other are largely irrelevant. Wanting or being concerned with filling your quadrants with only one type of troll is considered a little odd just because it’s limiting, thus the use of the word ‘fetish’, but it wouldn’t be any real cause for alarm. I’ve been called picky a few times, but it’s about as relevant as preferring curved horns over straight, or in a human case I suppose light hair over dark.” She looked at Karkat again and shook her head. “We clashed a little on the ship. The exact details are not relevant, but I disagreed with certain decisions he made and the stress of confinement and fear made things escalate.”

“Makes me rather glad I, uhh, don’t do that quadrant at all,” said Tavros with a shrug. Equius looked at him, and Tavros said “What? I’m not embarrassed about it, I didn’t do anything wrong! And it’s not like, um, any drones are going to find us here.”

“What do you mean by you don’t ‘do’ it?” asked Dave.

“Yeah, I, uhh, have this thing where I don’t feel romantic hate. I don’t really like to be platonic enemies with anyone either. For trolls not having it is really really weird, and kind of gross, and it can get you in huge trouble, but I guess for humans it’s not a big deal.” Tavros smiled at Karkat and Gamzee. “I guess it really was fate we landed here.”

John looked slightly ill. “Wait, so is this why you thought Homer Simpson wanted to bone Flanders? Seriously, thanks for the nightmares, guys.”

“Huh,” said Jade. “I think I’ve read some of that fanfic.”

“John, Jade,” Rose said, tapping her pencil on her notepad. “Getting off-topic. What was the last one? Ashen?”

“Yeah,” said Terezi, pointing at Aradia and Equius. “That’s the one with three people. The ‘auspicious armistice’. Aradia and Equius have me as their auspistice. Luckily I’m the primary mediator so there won’t be a problem when he ‘coons, things were kind of touch-and-go while I was still pupating and Aradia wasn’t. We do have a bit of conflict sometimes, but ours isn’t so bad that we can’t hold out for a while. And Nepeta’s the primary mediator for Eridan and Gamzee, and Kanaya is for Vriska and Tavros.”
“Auspiticism is where two trolls hate each other and require an intervener, or moderator. Well, traditionally. It’s to stop there from being rampant black infidelity, but it can serve with three trolls who hate each other. All three of them can move around as moderator depending on which pair needs it… Alright, does this make sense to all of you?”

“Sort of.” John shook his head. “It seems complicated though, why would you put yourself through the hassle of so many romances?”

“From a biological standpoint, the genetic material recovered from both a matespritship and a kismessitude are required for the propagation of our species,” Kanaya said. “Moirallegiance and auspiticism have developed over time to assist in keeping trolls alive long enough to get those quadrants filled so breeding can happen.”

“This is actually very fascinating,” Rose said with a smile. “Is the floor open to questions now?”

“I guess, as long as we can ask you guys questions too.” Karkat might not have had a notebook to take notes but he looked as ready as Rose was with questions.

“I don’t see how that would be a problem.” Rose cleared her throat. “I’ll ask the jealousy question John asked first. Is there jealousy, for instance if one of you has to spend more time with one quadrant then another, or between matesprits and Kismess…kismessi? Kismesses?”

“Kismeses,” Vriska corrected her. “And yeah, it can get a bit difficult to handle. Usually quadrants pretty much don’t cross over, like, even kismeses don’t seriously damage each other’s other quadrant relationships. That’s kind of considered to be not playing fair, and you can easily like someone’s moirail or matesprit while hating them so you don’t want to hurt them in the first place. But sometimes it can be a problem. And we didn’t even mention quadrant-flipping. If you piss your matesprit off enough they can flip black, or vice versa if your kismesis starts to like you. That’s why Equius and Aradia needed an auspistice. Not Gamzee and Eridan, though.”

“Yeah, Gamzee was beating the shit out of Eridan and Eridan’s preferred weapon is a gun so he didn’t have a non-lethal way to retaliate. That’s within the realm of normal behaviour for trolls, but we were trapped in close quarters together, as Kanaya said, and we preferred both of them stayed alive, so Nepeta stepped in,” Karkat explained. “And then there’s Eridan and Feferi, seriously, I couldn’t keep track of what they were from minute to minute.”

“So, er, Eridan, if you weren’t going for the bucket thing, what did you want? What was that comment about building piles?”

“I was asking if you wanted to go pale - adjective, not verb, I mean. Moirail-type pale. I thought that was obvious, but I guess I was wwrong.” Eridan shrugged. “So, now you know wwhat I really meant, wwhat do you think? I mean, come on. I’m a prince, howw much better wwill you do? We fix each other’s problems, you get an awwsome troll protector, and in return you just tell me wwhen I shouldn’t kill stuff. Pity I had to leawe all my science wwands behind, I coulda built us an awwsome pile.” He caught John’s expression. “Piles are a red an’ pale thing, you make a heap of wwhatewer’s handy and sit in it for cuddlin’ and feelings jams. Leftower nesting instincts, I think.”

“I think I need some time to think about it,” said John, wide-eyed and white in the face. He couldn’t quite put it into words, but after Gamzee’s comment about moirails being each other’s “other halves”, this actually felt more invasive than when he’d thought Eridan wanted to sleep with him. “I mean, I didn’t know that sort of relationship existed till just now, and if it’s as important as you say I don’t think I should just jump in!… And I think I’d be more inclined to say yes if you stopped stealing my stuff and referring to me as ‘Egbert Human’.”
Jade looked a little uncomfortable. “I don’t really get this blackrom thing. Why would you want to sleep with someone you hated? Isn’t that really depressing or hurtful?”

“Eh, think of it more as a really intense rivalry. Kismeses are supposed to push each other to greater strengths, as well as takin’ out their antisocial tendencies together. Stops us killin’ everyone else.” Eridan looked at Feferi. “Wee had some good times in the black, didn’t we?”

“Oh yes,” Feferi giggled, blushing. “Remember the first time we flipped black?” She sighed, and gazed up at the ceiling. “I told him I didn’t want to be his morayeel anymore, he asked me if I wanted to flip red, I said no, and he shot me!” She pulled down the waistband of her skirt slightly, exposing a nasty-looking burn scar. “I think I had better success keeping him under control as his rival than I ever did as his pacifier. I guess those quadrants aren’t as different as you might think.”

Eridan giggled too. “And you made spade-shaped cookies, and I forgot to check one and I was picking needle shards out of my gums all night? Yeah, those were the days.”

“That doesn’t seem very romantic…” Jade chewed on her lip. “But I guess it might be to you, and I can’t really judge.”

“Trolls really aren’t very social. I mean we are social, if we weren’t we wouldn’t be okay with the military or working together. But it’s easy to build rivalries—”

“We want to be the best at what we do, so rivalries come easy.” Terezi’s thought was cut off by Vriska. For the action Terezi jabbed her cane down on the other blueblooded troll’s foot. Vriska continued without a second thought. “But I think the hardest thing is knowing when it’s platonic hate or romantic hate. Sometimes hate or pity fades into indifference. I used to be black with Eridan, but it just sort of fell out of my favor. We see some things as romantic that you might not, and I guess that’s okay. Even if your romance does seem a little sad in comparison.”

“And full of rampant pale infidelity.” Terezi added. “That’s so weird. But it’s okay, we can have different cultures. Just seems so unfaithful. I know I wouldn’t want to have to bounce off all of them for help. I’d like one person to know all my problems and just how to make me feel better then have to re-explain it every time.”

“So, in your guys’ romance you said the, uhh, word ‘love’ has many meanings, is that like our system or is it, uhh, just like different applications meaning the same, uhh, thing?”

“Well, I love my dad.” John said. “But not like I’d love a girlfriend. We have a close bond, but it’s not the same. It’s not a form of romance either, we’re family. So it’s different, but we still use the word love. I mean, I ‘love’ playing pranks too, but that just means I enjoy doing that activity a lot… Huh, I didn’t realize how hard it was to explain stuff like this. You just sort of understand it, and never really have to think about it.”

“Family?” Karkat asked. “What do you mean by family? Is that like your weird mammal herds?”

“Um.” Jade looked up at Rose. “Can I borrow your notebook?” She took the book and pencil and started to scribble a family tree. “Okay, you guys don’t know who your genetic relatives are, right? You just hatch on your own and get raised by… lusii, was it?”

The trolls nodded. Nobody noticed Gamzee mouthing the word “Usually.”

“Well, humans are mammals, and so our mothers - like Rose’s mom - know us from birth and raise us. Our fathers usually stick around too - I guess they’re usually… matesprits?… with our mothers. Doesn’t always stay that way, but that’s how it tends to start.” She looked guiltily up at Rose, who
shrugged and motioned for her to continue. “Then our parents’ parents—” she kept drawing, “are our grandparents. Like my Grandpa. He mostly raised me because my parents had to travel a lot. And if our parents have more than one kid, those would be our siblings. Dave has one, he has a brother. Boy siblings are brothers, girls are sisters. John’s Nanna was my Grandpa’s sister, see? That’s what we thought was happening with Nepeta and Equius, they sort of seemed like siblings to us. And then your parents’ siblings are your aunts and uncles, and their children are your cousins. John and I and Rose and Dave are actually second cousins, but that gets a lot more complicated.”

The trolls looked over her family tree and nodded. Nepeta stole the notebook and traced over the lines. “That sounds interesting… I can kind of see how you’d think that since Equius and I are so close, but we’re moirails, we’re not related by blood or genes as far as I know. That reminds me of our—” Nepeta cut herself off and looked over at Gamzee. He shook his head and shrugged.

“Our ancestors,” he finished. “They’d be like our parents.. or parent I guess… They’re the person we have the closest genetic link to, usually we share a sign and a blood color. Like down to the shade.”

“Most of uth,” Sollux quickly added. “are lowbloodth, so we wouldn’t live to thee our ancethorth or dethcendentanth. Tho we thought it wath a bunch of hoofbeaththhit, turnth out that they are a thing. Like KK’th ancethtor was some really big religiouth figure. Tho we learned about moth of outhr by eckhtenthion. Though utually trollth never really know who they are or what they were like.”

“Except Tyrians,” Feferi said quietly.

“Right, they end up meeting and battling it out for the throne,” Sollux added quickly. He grabbed onto her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“This question is slightly off-topic,” Rose said. “but why is it that trolls are raised by lusii, not adult trolls? Or if there is no interaction among the young with the old, how do you learn about your culture without it?”

“Internet,” said Sollux immediately. “We hatch, find luthii, carpenter droneth build our hiveth for uth and give uth internet connectionth which thtart up automatically and… it’h complicated to eckthplain to a non-pthychic thpethieth…” He paused to wipe spit off his lip. “…but it tranthferth bathic language knowledge directly into our brainth. That’th how we thpoke English, we found fileth on your language and rigged them up like that. Our planet’th info on youth thn’t good, thomething mutht have wrecked the thpy droneth, but we had that much. That tech got made tho we can communicate in Alternian when we run into other trollth, thaveth adultth having to teach uth. Otherwithe every generation planet-thide would develop their own language among themthelveth and it’d all become a huge cluthterfuck. And letting adult trollth interact with wrigglerth would be worthe, but you already know we tend to be violent and apparently humanth don’t eat their babieth tho I can thee where there’th a clathh.”

“Though,” Gamzee said softly, “there is a difference between seadweller, highblood, midblood, and lowblood Alternian, and when you start dealing with adults their language is a little different. Every generation is a bit different.”

Eridan nodded quickly. “I noticed that too, Gam. But wwe learn everything wwe need to from online, or other media outlets. Learning to read is a bit harder, but wwe manage. Once wwe start interacting wwith other trolls it makes it easier.”

“Would you guys mind if I took a look at that technology?” Jade asked, sounding a bit sheepish. “I’m not really good with that kind of stuff, but I think it would be really interesting. Maybe John could help me out a bit. But I’d love something that could teach me language like that.”
Sollux nodded. Nepeta continued squinting at the family tree. “Wait, what’s this line say?” She pointed to the line drawn between the crude stick drawings of the parent humans. “‘Marr-i-age’? Is that like matespritship?”

“Sort of,” John said. “It’s a more official version. A couple have a big party with their friends and families and promise to be together forever, then they sign something for the church or the government or both which says they’re now married. And that’s sort of how families grow and link together. Like, at the end of summer my dad is going to marry Rose’s mom, and that will make me and Rose step-siblings. Like, siblings who aren’t blood-related.”

“Oh,” Nepeta said with a little smile. “That sounds kind of sweet, announcing a matespritship with a party.”

“It seems very problematic to me. Wwhat happens if you flip black, or if you fall out of favor wwith eachother? Ewen worse, wwhat happens if you have a blood difference and your partner dies?”

“There is a remedy to that, and an answer to all those questions.” Rose leaned towards the trolls as she spoke. “If you begin to hate or no longer love your partner and you’re married, there is something called divorce. That’s where two people end up announcing that their marriage is no more, they sign some papers saying that, and they move apart. Then one of them doesn’t talk to the other for a long time, except they call on occasion to ask for money. They also don’t seem to ever inquire about their offspring, unless it is a ploy to get money… In the case of death and divorce you can get remarried, which is often just as much of an event as the first time, and sometimes it’s bigger to spite the partner who left. Especially if the partner just walked out because it was too difficult, or he thought that the girl at the coffee shop was cuter and around more, and not always working. Or perhaps they felt intimidated at the other’s success… Or something along those lines.”

“Geez, Rose, and I thought you were bitter towards your mom…”

“Don’t worry, John, I do like your father much more than mine.”

“Well, I hope so, because I think the more you push him away the more he seems to pull you back,” John said. “In the case of death, that’s called being a widow for women or widower for men. That means you outlived your partner, for one reason or another. My mom got really ill when I was a kid, and… yeah.”

“Oh, I see. That makes sense, it’s wweird that a place without kismessitude would plan for that outcome. Sorry, I didn’t mean to have you both talk about a touchy subject. Then again this is discussion of relationships… So, it’s bound to happen. Sort of a laww of the uniwerverse.”

“It’s okay,” John said, shrugging. “Neither situation’s ideal, but good things came out of them. What’s the old saying, roses grow best in shit? Sorta like you - I don’t imagine you all wanted to have to flee your home, but when you did, you met us!” He grinned.

Eridan returned the grin, and Karkat rolled his eyes. “Well if that isn’t the most—”

“Shut your mouth, Kar.” Eridan snapped, looking at Karkat quickly. The shorter troll just shook his head and with a small sigh decided to change the subject.

“What about the others?”

“Diamonds, spades, and clubs. Like your playing cards. Sollux reckons that there must have been some kind of exploration between our planets centuries ago, since we have a lot of little bits of
culture in common like that. Maybe psychic links. I guess if we survive here we can investigate that.”

“Alternia doethn’t exactly have peatheful exploration, tho I’m leaning towardth phycic linkth. We have nameth and thoundth for each. One of the biggeth thingth in Alternia, other than conquering, ith romance. We’ve been kind of mathhing wordth together to have a better word thince your language doethen’t have the wordth for it.”

“Which word would you care for first, or should we just give one then the definition?” Kanaya asked, looking over the humans. The group shrugged. It didn’t matter either way, and they hadn’t heard much in the actual language, instead the trolls had been adamant on speaking nothing but English when the humans were close. “Alright, I suppose matespritship, since that was the one Karkat first mentioned.”

Kanaya cleared her throat and made a noise. It was higher, and had some sort of weird overtone ringing to it. The word or words seemed to bounce around her mouth. The humans couldn’t decipher a noise that would have made a word, instead it just sounded like some weird mash of chirping and singing.

“That’s strange,” John said after she finished saying the word. “I don’t know if there is anything decipherable for us in that. It just sounded like noise. No offence, but I’m just letting you know.”

“I can say it slower.” The humans leaned toward her trying to make out the noises that would constitute a word. Once she finished they shrugged again, still not being able to register the noises as something that would be a word.

“Maybe if you say it with just your middle vocal cord, then say it with all three?” Nepeta offered. “It’ll sound weird to us, but they use the equivalent of our middle, so it might help. I think all of us can ignore how weird it sounds, for the sake of example.”

Kanaya nodded. “Alright, I’ll say it slowly as well… Sa-kit-an-ee-ru.” This time the humans could make out a word; it was almost like it was being sung rather than spoken, but obviously the highs and lows of each syllable were important. “Were all of you able to understand that? I must say, it felt strange to say it like that. Was it understandable?” The other trolls nodded, looking a bit surprised.

“Well. I suppose it is possible to sort of teach humans Alternian.”

“Sake-it-annie-roo,” Dave repeated. “That’s basically what I heard, only it was different. I don’t think I can do just what I heard, I don’t think my voice has that ability actually. Which is saying something because I can do a lot of things with my voice, just not what you just did.”

“Then I should be good to say it with all three sounds, since that actually doesn’t make a word.” Kanaya nodded and said it once more with all three tones. This time the humans could hear the word, but barely over the other chirping and vibrating high noises.

“Okay, so the others? If you don’t mind doing the middle then adding on the other noises,” Jade said.

“It’s not a purroblem. You dealt with our very bad human, we don’t mind making Alternian understandable fur your ears.” Nepeta cleared her throat. “This would be for meowrail - uh, moirail. I’ll say it right,” she quickly added, looking at the other trolls. “Ta-mi-sen-ee-ru, or…” This time the humans could hardly hear the word over the low hum that just rolled over it. The word seemed doubled as she spoke. “That’s it. It’s weird to say it so slowly.”

“Oh, can I do the one for auspisticism?” Terezi suddenly jumped in. “It sounds so cool just regularly, I wonder what it sounds like when you dumb it down?” The other trolls shrugged, which made Terezi’s grin widen. “The solochord word is Ha-as-mun-ee-ru.. wow that is weird. And all together
is—” This time the humans nearly had to cover their ears, the tones sounded wrong, like they were clashing, before somehow turning into something that was listenable without their ears bleeding. It took them a moment to recover, and Dave was still rubbing at his ears as Terezi gave a little laugh. “Such a cool word.”

“That was terrible,” Jade said, then covered her face with her hands. “I don’t mean that in a bad way, it’s just that noise hurts our ears. Oh gosh.” Jade buried her face in her hands. “I don’t mean to offend you.”

“No offense taken,” Terezi said still smiling. “Who wants to do kismessitude?”

“Since it’s mostly been loww— I mean wwarmbloods wwho have said it it should be a colderblood.”

“The accent might confuse them, Eridan, seadwellers have totally different diction than landwellers.”

“Gam? Equ? Wris? One of you wwant to say it?”

“I’m still messed up, maybe the spidersis wouldn’t mind since Equius ain’t got no reason to ever been speaking that word. I mean, my language is hard enough to understand if you’re a troll, I don’t think it would be anything if you’re all being human.”

“Fine, I can say it. Jis-i-tun-ee-ru..” The next set of noises, that the humans had to remember was a word, seemed growled, dangerous. The four backed up on the couch just the slightest amount. The could hear the word over the growl, and the slight tumbling tone as each syllable peaked. “There you are. That’s how we say them. But you’ve got to be careful with that one because if you change the tone it means… well, we already told you that during that movie. Let’s not go there.”

“It sounds more like noises than words.”

“Well, over time the words have evolved to be said quickly.” Kanaya quickly said all four of the new sounds, much briefer but still identifiable as being linked to the longer versions. “That’s the most basic way to say them, and that’s what most trolls use in any conversation about quadrants, unless you’re getting specific. But I don’t think we are going to be able teach you Alternian. We make short handed versions of those noises at each other. For instance…” Kanaya quickly made the noise that started out off key and in barely a blink the word harmonized. Vriska and Tavros returned the noise, just as fast. “It’s also become our shorthand, like you saying ‘I love you’ becomes ‘love you’, or just ‘love’.”

“I see.” Rose nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Usually though, we transcribe those sounds as just the symbols,” Aradia added. “Some keyboard designs have keys for the symbols so they can be typed quickly, or we assemble emoticon designs.”

John shook his head, and said “I don’t know, guys, typing ‘I club you’ doesn’t really give the right impression.”

The trolls chuckled, then paused suddenly as another sound joined them. It was quiet and muffled, but unmistakeable.

Gamzee was holding a hand over his mouth, shaking slightly, quite definitely laughing.

“Is Gamzee laughing?” Terezi asked, turning to find the noise.

“What, does he not usually laugh?”
“It’s just been a while since he has. Really has, I suppose I should say.”

“I’m still here, you know,” Gamzee added, his voice tight trying to contain the laughter. “I just think that ‘I club you’ is the best sentence ever said. I club you Nepeta, you too Eridan.”

“Oh cod. I don’t know if I should be upset or happy at that.”

“Since he hasn’t broken out the actual clubs, I’d go with happy.” Karkat rolled his eyes at Gamzee, who was trying to get his snickers under control. “It wasn’t all that funny.”

“I know!” Gamzee chewed on his hand and managed to get the words out between giggles. “I know, but it’s been so motherfuckin’ long since I laughed at something and meant it!”

Karkat thumped Gamzee on the back until he got his breathing back under control. “You’re weird.”

“S’why you pity me, Karbro.”

~~~

“Uh, Gamzee, I think we should talk.” Karkat shuffled his feet.

“S what I’m here for, my palebro.” Gamzee shifted to make room in the plushie pile. “My turn to be listening to you.”

“About that. When I told the humans moirails don’t mate with each other, you looked really uncomfortable and looked at me. What was that about?”

“Oh.” Gamzee shifted in the pile again. “It wasn’t much of anything, anyway I don’t know if I should be saying anything… Can you just leave it?”

“Gamzee, listen, I know you don’t like talking about that. I don’t like hearing about it much either. But I know you have to talk about it, and back on the tugship you told me if you start avoiding conversations again I was supposed to smack you until you were begging me to let you talk about it versus keeping quiet. I really don’t want to beat the crap out of you, so maybe instead of being the most difficult asshole I’ve ever had to deal with, maybe you should just talk about it.”

“This isn’t just for me, see, it’s all up and affecting other trolls to. I don’t want to start any rumors, though I know they all be the truth. I don’t want anyone else to have to deal with the knowledge I got rocking my thinkpan about the whole pale quadrant. I don’t mind keeping this inside, it ain’t making me any more bad, it just is there being a thing I am knowing.”

Karkat sat down and frowned. “Is this about…? Uh, well, I’m flattered, but I’m really not into that, and I don’t think it’s a good idea right now anyway. But why would you think I’d tell anyone? That’s not very moirail-like.”

“Huh- what?” Gamzee sounded horrified. “No! No, I do not think we should be pailing in the pale, that is so far from what I meant you have no idea.”

“Oh, well, it just seemed like that might be it. You’ve been really weird about most of our moirallegiance. Not to mention everyone elses’, sorry if I thought it might be a thing…”

“Just shh, okay, I definitely do not have that as a thing. You don’t even know how much it disturbs me that I am coming off to all of you like that, I almost want to go out and tell everyone that I don’t have that as a thing. But I don’t want them to be asking the questions you are getting ready to…”
“If you know what I’m going to ask why don’t you just answer them?”

“Not much of a conversation if I am doing all the chattering.”

“Okay, so I guess you aren’t quadrant-flipping either. That’s good, I wasn’t looking forward to seeing Tavros’ face if you were.” Karkat sighed. “So why does it bother you?… Fuck. Speaking of Tavros… if it’s not a fetish you have, does moirallegiance just bother you? Like you don’t want one and you actually don’t believe it needs to be a relationship?”

“No, no, and don’t you ever think that. I pity you hard, and I don’t want you to ever think that my diamond for you would be wrecked over much of anything. I don’t even know what could ruin my half of it. I can’t think of nothing you could have or be doing that would make me lose it. I know I’m difficult and I’m sorry for it, bro, just shit’s motherfucking hard to speak about. I don’t want to lose you, shit, I can’t lose you! If I do I don’t think I could all be doing anything with me.”

“Why would you think I’d leave you? If anyone ever needed a moirail, you do right now!” Karkat moved as if to hug him, then jerked away as if he’d touched something hot. “There’s nothing you can say that could make me dump you, either. Diamonds don’t break that easily.” He held up his index finger and thumb, spread apart, and Gamzee returned the gesture, forming a diamond shape. “Look, if you don’t say something, it’ll just get worse until we fall apart anyway. Nothing you could say would be worse than what would happen if you don’t say it. I promise, it won’t go beyond this pile.”

“But it ain’t just me this is all getting into, they.. This is so motherfucking difficult. I wish I could just connect my finger with yours and you would understand. But I know I got to be flapping my maw and making the words. It’s just not only me that this is about. I said I don’t want to be spreading rumors, and with all the problems our whole group has had with talking things over I don’t want to add to it.” Gamzee sighed and snuggled closer. Not too close, but close enough Karkat understood how difficult it was to talk about. “You’re being so sweet about all this, I don’t know if I deserve someone like you.”

“Don’t get fucking sappy on me. You can talk about it, I promise I won’t say anything to anyone about what you say here. You know I’m good on that promise, I haven’t mentioned half the crap you’ve said, though I should probably tell Tavros. But I’ll wait for you to pull your head together and get yourself a bit more straightened out.”

“Well, um, it’s just that the other person it involves is… Well, you see, you know how the humans were all talking about family, and we don’t usually know our bloodlinks. Well I knew one of mine, right, which since I’m not Tyrian is pretty motherfucking amazing. But see if I all be telling you that I know and met the other troll he was with, the one who all helped make me, what would you say?”

“I’d say that’s unlikely, but I can’t imagine you’d lie about that, especially if it’s connected to… oh.” Karkat looked ill. “You’re saying… the Empress… and… both of them…”

Gamzee nodded grimly. “See, she’d all up and tell me, she kept telling me and talking to him about how I was their grub. She didn’t shut up about it. Kept saying that they’d all have me and… Feferi both since we were theirs. Their wrigglers. Or I guess the human term works better. They’d be our mom and dad, and Feferi’d be my sister. Not my fishsis, but like by blood, my sister. Fuck, that sounds so weird.”

“So that news thing Sollux found about how they’re pale isn’t true? Why would they lie about…” Karkat trailed off. Gamzee looked down and almost imperceptibly shook his head.

“That wasn’t… they are. See, they said it, and I tried not to believe them, but no, they went and
made sure I understood how pale for each other they are. That’s why I didn’t want to all tell you. I know that it’s gross, and I didn’t even want to know, but I don’t want to lose you, Karkat. But they’re ketamisen, and look what all came outta it…”

Gamzee pulled away from Karkat. He was pretty sure that in the levels of ‘nothing he could do’ this actually was something that could break things off. He knew what everyone thought of moirail grubs, and he was the known product of a pale bucket. He sighed, curling up around himself to hopefully soften the blow.

Karkat stared for a moment, then shook his head. “That’s not a whole other universe of shit, that’s something someone proven disgusting did. So what? You think I’m going to leave you over something like that? I told you I couldn’t even think of a reason, and that doesn’t even come close to qualifying as one.” Karkat swallowed and moved over to pull Gamzee into his arms, and waited for the tension and the fear to pass; he didn’t move, just kept his hold. “If anything, it makes you even more pitiful than you were before, which I didn’t think was possible. But I guess you proved me wrong.”

“B-but…” Gamzee stuttered, tears welling up.

“It’s not like you chose to be theirs, moron.” Karkat was choking up as well, tears dripping onto Gamzee’s shirt. “You and Feferi are the only good that ever came out of them. Don’t forget that. You didn’t leave me over being a mutant, and people can actually see and comment on that.”

“I-I can’t let Fef know, not ever. I know she’s upset that I can’t be around her but… she looks like him as well as her. I saw her and I knew they were right.”

“Well, at least that explains why you act that way around her. I kind of figured she reminded you of her, but I didn’t realize… See, Gamzee, this is why you can’t be a complete idiot all the time. Nothing bad happens when you talk about it. It just helps me understand more. I’ll figure out something to tell her if she starts getting on either of our cases about you not really being around her. Luckily the humans are pretty distracting, and she can sort of swim again, so it hasn’t come up. But if it does, I’ll help you, okay?” Karkat rubbed his cheek against the side of Gamzee’s head, careful to avoid hitting their horns together. “I’m still pale for you.”

“Pale for you too.”

They lay quietly for a while, occasionally sniffing, until Gamzee’s tears stopped flowing and he looked up. “Uh, on a slightly happier note relating to palerom… Tav doesn’t have a moirail now, and I was thinking of helping him with that. I dunno, is that weird? Usually it’s your moirail who helps you find a matesprit, not the other way round. And, ah, there may be… discussion of feelings involved. Is that crossing a line?”

“None of us really seem to be doing anything the traditional way here. I don’t see why that would make anything weirder. It won’t make you less pale for me, right?”

Gamzee smiled. “No way.”

“Who were you thinking of? I know he used to have a thing for Aradia, but I think she’s with Kanaya now, and I’m not sure Terezi is a good match, she’s a bit… pushy.”

“I have some thoughts, but honestly, most trolls are a little much for him. He’s real sweet, and he’s needing someone who is just as sweet. I’ve been talking to him, and I know who he has a little crush on, but I don’t think that’s all something that should happen without me looking more into it.” Gamzee smiled a little bit, obviously giving hints but not coming right out and saying it. Whether it
was to annoy or tease Karkat, he wouldn’t know, but he didn’t mind it either way.

“Are you going to tell me or are you just going to drop hints until I connect the dots? “ Karkat sighed. “Seriously, do I ever get a break with being the most logical troll in our whole group? I have to figure out crap all night, and then even on the pile you’re forcing me to deduce from your back asswards clues.”

Gamzee laughed, it was soft, but enough to make Karkat smile. “I don’t know, it’s kind of fun to see you get all up and confused. Trying to be figuring out it all.”

“Oh, fuck you.” Karkat shook his head. “Seriously, you sometimes are the most difficult troll in the whole universe and I almost want to figure out how to force the information out of you. I’m just too nice to actually do it, you should feel lucky you are blessed with such a patient and nice moirail.”

Gamzee smiled again. “Well, it was time both of us had some good luck.”
John had run out of mixing bowls and moved on to saucepans. He hummed happily as he stirred a batch of chocolate fudge cake mix with a soup ladle (Dr Lalonde’s kitchen was also equipped with only one wooden spoon). The poor trolls all looked so thin, they’d appreciate some good home-made cake. Maybe he’d got carried away trying to make eight types at once, but he didn’t know what flavours they liked best yet.

He was so absorbed in his task that he jumped and nearly dropped the pan when he heard a voice behind him say “Hey, spacemonkey, does a motherfucker smell food?”

“Oh, hey! Gamzee, right?” John smiled at the troll, who was half-hiding in the doorway. He was getting their names down, but he just liked to be sure. “You hungry?” Dave had been right when they first met, Gamzee did look like a walking skeleton, and pretty depressed to boot. The troll nodded awkwardly. “Okay, you want to come in and grab some food? If you’re bored you could taste-test some of these cakes for me. Just remember to use clean spoons, other people have to eat these.”

Gamzee slunk in and took the saucepan full of vanilla sponge mix. He nearly dipped his claw in, before sagging under John’s disapproving glare and fetching a teaspoon. When the mix touched his tongue his eyes rolled up and his scarred mouth curved into a huge grin.

“Oh motherfucker, you do not know how long it’s been since I had food this good! Here, you’d better take this off me before I eat the whole motherfuckin’ thing. Damn!”

“Thanks, but please don’t drool in it,” John said, smiling. “Okay, if you wanna test them for me that’s good. You can help me bake, if you want?”

“Well, if my spacemonkey bro wants a little help, I’m happy to up and give it.”

“My name is John. Stop calling me spacemonkey.”

“Okay, Johnbro.”

“…Eh, close enough. Better than ‘Egbert Human’.”

“Fishbro really likes you, you know.”

“Please don’t remind me, he’s starting to creep me out and I think he’s been stealing my shoelaces for some reason.”

“It ain’t a bad thing. He sees you as being a good… human. The kind of influence he needs, if you know what I mean. I’m sure he doesn’t mean to be coming on strong, but that’s kind of the fishbro’s style. He used to tell me that when he took over the land, I’d be the first landdweller he’d kill. I didn’t know how to react, because either that threat was valid or he was coming on real strong.”

“This is your attempt to make him sound less creepy?!”

Gamzee grimaced at John’s reaction to his statement. “Sorry, it wasn’t meant to be a bad thing. It’s like friendly teasing where we come from.”

“Threatening to murder people is totally different than friendly teasing.”
“For us it really isn’t. Remember?” Gamzee said with a shrug. “What do you want this motherfucker to do? I can up and help you bake…” Gamzee went quiet suddenly. “But you’ll have to show me, because I’m not too sure what to do.” He fidgeted for a moment, playing with the claw on his thumb.

“No need to be nervous, plenty of people don’t know how to bake. It’s not a required thing on Earth, don’t feel weird about it. Can you grab the pans from on the table, put them out, and put some grease in them?”

“Got it, Johnbro.” Gamzee moved over to the table and moved the pans over to the counter. John nudged the can of non-stick spray with his elbow over to the troll. Both of them busied themselves with their respective jobs. “Do you like baking, Johnbro?” Gamzee asked suddenly.

“Yeah, I mean, I like it but I wouldn’t make a career out of it. My dad taught me when I was younger, it reminds me of him. I don’t have much of a sweet tooth anymore because of it. I ate way too many sweets when I was younger. But I still like making them for other people.”

“Oh… I see.” Gamzee nodded. “That make sense.” The room sank into a silence again, all put the sounds of both of them working, though John noticed the room was distinctly more awkward now.

“What’s wrong? Do trolls have some kind of taboo against cake?”

“Heh, no, there is no taboo against cake. I like pie myself, but I don’t think you all could make my favorite kind. I ain’t one to frown on a little cake though, it’s not often we get any real sweets, like this, they tend not to get shipped over to Alternia. Those kind of things stay on the ships for the adults to enjoy.”

“Oh, well, I guess that makes some sort of sense. What’s your favorite kind of pie, or does it have some weird alien ingredient?”

“It has a weird alien ingredient. It’s all good though, I haven’t had one in ages. I want one, but I can go without.” Gamzee looked towards John and smiled. “You’re real nice to bake for all of us. I mean, all of you are real nice to take us in, even though you all know that we are trying to get away from our Empire.”

“Hey, judging by what you’ve said, I don’t know if your Empire should keep on… going. It sounds pretty messed up.”

“It’s got its problems, that’s why we’re trying to get Feferi strong enough to change it.”

Jade walked into the kitchen, inhaled happily, leaned out the back door and hollered “Ohhhh, John’s making cake!” The sounds of running alerted the two cooks to the interest of the other trolls.

“You still don’t seem too comfortable,” John said to Gamzee. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s just…”

Vriska interrupted, peering round the back door, followed by a tongue and then the rest of Terezi shortly afterwards. “Hey, food!”

A little head poked in under Terezi’s. “Did someone say food?” Nepeta was smiling.

“John and Gamzee are baking,” Jade said with a smile. Vriska snickered, and quickly covered her mouth. “What kinds of cakes, John?”

“Too many cakes,” John said, shaking his head. “But I don’t know what all the trolls like, so I
figured I’d try as many flavors as possible. Hey, Gamzee, can you pour the batter into the pans? I would give you the spoon, but there is only one, so try to get as much in as possible without.”

“Yeah, I can do that for you, bro.”

“Having fun?” Vriska said, snickering again and nudging Terezi, who joined in and jabbed back with her cane at Vriska’s ankle.

John frowned. “Is something funny?”

“I don’t know, just… seeing a boy being so open about baking is a bit funny. I mean, Gamzee’s didn’t really count because that was for-”

“Watch your mouth, spidersis,” Gamzee hissed, his hackles rising. Vriska sensibly backed away.

“What’s so strange about boys baking?” Jade asked, cocking her head to the side. “I think it makes them much cooler. I can’t bake. Or really cook for that matter.”

“Boys don’t tend to cook on Alternia, well, beyond just throwing meat into the… oven? Or fire, whichever they have. Girls tend to have more refined taste than that,” Terezi said with a nod. “Though it’s not universal. I mean, look at what Nepeta eats.”

“Says the woman who licks everything,” Vriska said with an eye-roll. Nepeta giggled.

“Oh, yeah,” Gamzee said, shuffling his feet. “Specially with my church. I could sorta get away with it on Alternia, but once I was conscripted I was supposed to stop. It’s sort of a thing with us. Everyone fights and everyone paints, but beyond that, females create and males destroy.”

“Uh, yeah,” Gamzee said, shuffling his feet. “Specially with my church. I could sorta get away with it on Alternia, but once I was conscripted I was supposed to stop. It’s sort of a thing with us. Everyone fights and everyone paints, but beyond that, females create and males destroy.”

“Oh, I see,” Jade said. “Here it’s not like that. It used to be, but not anymore. Plenty of the best cooks in the world are male.”

“Wait, I thought you said trolls are matriarchal?” John asked. “Why is being girly a bad thing if you are?”

“It’s not so much that,” Vriska said. “More like you’re supposed to stick with the role you were hatched for. Of course I don’t put too much stock in it - that would be so boring!” She sniffed at a batch of cake mix. “Mm, you’re good at this. Heh, I kind of like seeing a boy cook. It’s… daring.”

“I can kind of understand,” Jade said. “Not the idea, I mean, I don’t get that. But you guys are like insects. Insects have to fall within their birth role or they get killed or abandoned. It would make sense those kind of things still showed up in your society.”

“It’s kind of weird,” John said, slightly distracted. “I mean, since you guys…” Now, he was embarrassed. “Since you guys are, you know…”

Vriska raised an eyebrow, “We know what?”

“You guys don’t have so much biological gender difference as humans do…” John looked proud of himself for managing to find some way to say it. “I wouldn’t think those kinds of things would still matter. They are starting to matter less and less to humans.”

Vriska shrugged. “It’s just there, I guess. I never questioned why it was there, it was there so I decided it was boring. I mean I like FLARPing, but building doomsday machines was just as fun. One of them I was supposed to do, the other I wasn’t.”
“Alternia isn’t as regulated as the adults are,” Terezi added. “We can get away with a lot more when we are younger, but not when we join the fleet. Our roles are always spelled out for us. Like as a tealblood, I’d work in public service, and I was a girl so all my roles were decided when I was young. I didn’t mind, I always wanted to be a legislacerator, it sounds like so much fun.”

“That sounds sad,” Jade said, shaking her head. She took a seat at the counter. “Not getting to choose what you become when you grow up.”

“Most of us are totally okay with the jobs we’re assigned, though,” Vriska added. “I wanted to be a pirate, so I made that happen.” She smiled. “It makes your wrigglerhood easier, you can train for your roles and learn to be the best. That’s what really matters, what’s the point in doing anything if you’re not the best at it?”

Meanwhile, Gamzee was glancing around at the group; seeing that nobody was watching him, he unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeves. He winced as he saw the scars, but nobody was likely to look closely, and he didn’t want to trail his sleeves in the cake. Silently, he poured red velvet cake batter into one of the cooking sheets, hoping to get it done as soon as possible so he could cover his arms again. He set the bowl down and it vanished as soon as he did. He looked over to where he set it, confused. There was a giggle from underneath the bar countertop. Nepeta scurried under the table, nudging the chairs out of order.

“Oh, this is sooo good!” she said, pulling her fingers out of her mouth.

Terezi knelt down and lifted the tablecloth, cackling. “Does my nose detect a thief? You’ll hang for this, kitty!”

“Oh noo!” Nepeta squealed melodramatically, clasping her hands in mock horror.

“Unless you share!”

“Yay!” Nepeta pushed the mix towards Terezi, who scooped up a fingerful.

“Mm! Red. My favourite.”

John bent down and frowned at her. “You know, I’d just give you cake if you asked. Sneaking around while I’m messing with a hot oven isn’t a good idea, and I’m pretty sure raw eggs can make you sick.”

Nepeta pouted. “Aww, but stolen food tastes better!”

John sighed, “Fine, but if you get sick don’t blame me. And stay away from the hot oven. I don’t want to hurt you, okay?” Terezi nodded, climbed under the table, and both she and Nepeta were left to lick the bowl clean.

“Hey, food!” Dave arrived from the living room and took the sticky ladle. “You mind, John?” At John’s approving nod, he sat at the table with the ladle and the chocolate-smeared mixing bowl and dug in. Surprise briefly crossed his face as Terezi grabbed his ankle; he looked down, and without a word joined the girls under the table, giving the viewers a thumbs-up as they laughed.

John looked back to Gamzee with a smile.

“Help me get all these in the oven? I think we can only do like four at a time. But the rest of them we’ll put in the fridge until we have the oven space.” Gamzee nodded, grabbing two of the pans now holding the batter, walked over to the oven and looked around, setting both of them on the stove-top as he slipped on the oven gloves. Still nobody watching; good. The gloves didn’t cover his forearms.
He walked back to the other side of the counter quickly, trying to keep his arm hidden as he grabbed the other two and walked back towards the oven. He slid both of them in; the faster he got them in the sooner he could cover himself back up and...

“I didn’t realize you had tattoos on your arm too!” John said, looking over the mixing bowl at Gamzee. The purpleblooded troll froze. After a moment of silence John nodded towards the lines on Gamzee’s arm. “Is that a design or words?”

Vriska gasped and walked over to John. “Perhaps we shouldn’t have this conversation.”

“What, does it say something stupid? I once saw a guy with ‘empty’ tattooed on his arm - he thought it meant strength, I didn’t have the heart to tell him.”

“Remember the girl that had ‘duck sauce’?” Jade added with a giggle.

Gamzee breathed deeply, his regrown fangs working at his lip. He forced himself to think of the Kin. He’d promised them he would control himself. Things would have been fine if John hadn’t reached out, touched his arm, and said “Can I see it close up…?”

John did indeed get a very close-up view as Gamzee’s fist swung into his face. There wasn’t a crack, and other than pain from the impact, John didn’t think anything was broken. His hand quickly grabbed onto his jaw and cheek. Gamzee was gone, faster then John would have ever given him credit for; he vanished outside, pushing past the new arrivals and leaving the stunned and worried Karkat and Rose standing in the door frame.

John rubbed his jaw and mumbled “What the heck was that for?” The question was directed at no one really. Just a question left hovering there. Vriska looked over to Karkat, then to the other humans in the room. She fidgeted nervously, and almost opened her mouth to speak.

Karkat glared. “Those aren’t tattoos.” He spun on his heel without another word, and was gone.

Dave blinked as it connected. “Wait, all of those markings are scars? What the hell did he do, lose a fight with a lawnmower?”

Rose frowned.

~~~

“Equius! Are you okay?”

“No really.” The big troll groaned and rubbed his forehead. “My silk gland is out of control. I barely slept, and I woke up this morning covered in stringy blue slime. I’m constantly hungry and I’ve gained enough weight that my clothes are starting to get uncomfortable. Then I fell asleep while I was working on the Rose human’s car engine, had a nightmare in which your obnoxious ashmates dragged me into your cave at gunpoint and made me draw horrible comics about them, and woke up with my face in a puddle of oil.”

Nepeta giggled. “You know, you wouldn’t have this problem if you’d just ‘coon already. Not that I’m keen to be separated from you again, but it’s time you got it over with.”

“I don’t know if I exactly want to broach this subject with the humans. Let alone leave myself that vulnerable here. The Empire could arrive…”

“They won’t be here for a while. Sollux is tracking them and he’s got the Helmsman on the flagship working with him. The sooner you do it, the sooner it’s over. We can all talk to the humans about it,
hopefully the Empire arrives between you and Gamzee needing to cocoon, not when Gamzee is needing to or you’re still in it. But the sooner you do it the better our luck is.”

“Nepeta, it would be unwise to bring this up to the humans…”

“We have to do what we have to do, Equius. We can find you some place secluded to hide out and I’ll defend you. Promise.”

Equius sighed looking down at Nepeta. “I still don’t know if I feel comfortable enough. I know you would defend me, it’s just a difficult circumstance. On top of that I’m not sure I want to explain what happens to the humans. It’s awkward enough among trolls, let alone explaining the full process to humans, even with all their talk of being accommodating. I don’t understand their species.”

“I think they genuinely want to help us. I think they are more curious and interested then outright violent. They’ve never seen aliens before, we’re first contact. I’m sure they are really interested. It’s good it was us, not the Empire or another group. They just want to help us and learn about us. That’s not so bad.”

“Jade mentioned setting up somewhere in the basement. But I’m not sure if I’m willing to leave myself so exposed.”

“I’ll be there to protect you. You can’t put it off furever. The sooner you do it, the sooner it’s over and you can help us claw down the Empire.”

“I should finish Rose’s engine. This thing was terribly inefficient. It seems as if humans haven’t lost reliance on ancient technologies. There has to be better ones out there, at least better fuel.”

“Equius, they’re kind of a new species. Advancement takes time. Don’t blame them too much. Do you want me to stay out here and keep you awake? Once you’ve finished you can ask for somewhere private to pupate.”

“Was that more of an ‘I’m going to stay out here until you’re finished, at which point you can expect if you don’t ask I will’?”

“Yes.”

“Nepeta, that’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Nepeta stomped her foot down and glared up at the taller troll.

“Fine.”
“Is Gamzee doing any better?”

“A little,” said Karkat warily.

Kanaya nodded. “Good. That’s good.”

“So no, you don’t need to break out the chainsaw.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“You were on the ship.”

Kanaya sighed. “Karkat… You’re not the only one who almost lost a quadrant to trauma. Did we ever tell you what happened when Vriska’s lusus died when we were six?”

“No and I’d prefer it stayed that way, because she’d disembowel me if she found out I knew.”

“Really, Karkat, I think it would help if I told you. I won’t let her know.” At Karkat’s nervous nod, Kanaya began her story. “As you know, we all first heard about the rockslide from Equius. Vriska never did talk to you much, but she normally trolled me and Tavros every day and we got suspicious when we didn’t hear from her for a week afterwards. We, or rather I since it was unfortunately out of Tavros’ price range to travel so far, bought shuttle tickets and we both made our way out to her hive. Half of it was destroyed and we found her curled up in one of the undamaged rooms. She hadn’t left the hive since the rockslide happened. Nor had she bathed, but we found out later that wasn’t unusual. She lived on candy and leftovers for three days and starved for another two, because she had spent her perigee’s food allowance on FLARP gear and could no longer hunt by picking trapped beasts from the web. She simply did not know how to function without her lusus. I know it can’t really accurately compare to Gamzee’s problem because this one was nobody else’s fault, but still.”

Karkat blinked. “Holy crap. I really didn’t know…”

“I wanted to bring her back to my hive, but she wasn’t fit enough for a journey that long and she refused to set foot in Tavros’, so we both stayed with her. It took four perigees, but Tavros and I managed to get her back to something approaching normal, insofar as Vriska is ever normal. In fact I think she’s better than ever.” Kanaya’s wistful smile was replaced with a stern look. “We certainly didn’t permit her to carry on endangering everyone around her.”

“I’m trying, but seriously you don’t understand. I don’t think I do and making him talk is like pulling.. okay, that was about to be terrible. He’s not even here and I’m censoring… What he told me is monstrous.”

“That doesn’t mean he becomes a monster. Circumstance doesn’t have that much of an effect.”

“In his mind it does. In his mind, please don’t ask me how it works. He’s going to have this, enjoy his freedom, but behind him it’s always looming. He won’t tell me some of it. He’ll get detailed when I really don’t want details, but when I ask about other things he quickly shrugs it off or finds a way to skirt around the subject. He’s so damn good at it, I don’t catch on until we’re far enough away it’s not even a speck on the horizon. It’s a distant dream.”

“Perhaps, your relationship—”

“It’s not our relationship. Seriously.”

“I’m just saying, if you were better suited for each other then perhaps you wouldn’t have as many problems.”
“You’re not everyone’s moiral. And we’re working on it. You know, maybe there is something he can’t explain, and maybe there is something he doesn’t want to explain. I mean, there are things I know that would make your skin crawl. I’m sure there are things you don’t talk about with what happened to Vriska or Aradia or even Tavros with casual onlookers or friends. Because they are that personal.” Karkat was clicking his claws together, trying to be as subtle and away from the painful topics as possible.

“I would assume at this point we all need to be honest and forthright with each other.”

“Kanaya.”

“Yes?”

“You’re being an idiot. Which is really unlike you.” Karkat sighed. “I mean you’ve been this way since him and I made it pale-official. Now, I can understand if I thought you had a crush on him or me. But you never gave any indication of either. We are friends, I don’t know if you ever really talked to him before. Shit, I think only me, Tavros, and if you allow some stretch of the imagination Equius really talked to him. I know Terezi hated talking to him, I don’t think Vriska could have managed. Sollux found him intolerable. Eridan seemed to just message him to get a hold of me… Then again, Vriska was kind of the same way for awhile. Especially after the whole Aradia thing.”

“It is truly a miracle we managed to be friends, cross so many caste lines and all. I didn’t really speak to him, no, nor did I really speak to Equius for that matter. I think my most common conversation with Sollux was for free technical support.”

“God, we’re all shitty friends.”

“And to answer your question, before you rambled on,” Kanaya paused only long enough to sort her words, “I don’t believe you should be the primary counselor in a moirallegiance. I think you would benefit from a calming influence. You’re very angry most of the time.”

“To prove your point terribly fucking wrong, I’m calm, I’m not even mad you just said that. Even if that was really a terrible thing to say. I froze, I’ll admit, when Gamzee got his battle rage, and I even let him dole out whatever punishment he thought was justly deserved. I thought he was still some semblance of sane. I didn’t know, I didn’t understand. But when those tunnels turned arctic and all of us began to fear everything, like needles in our mind, who stepped forward? You were there, Terezi, Feferi, who made that decision? Feferi you’d think would be the least affected. Why didn’t she? She had Eridan to fight for… Though I’m really fucking glad she didn’t. That would have turned out even worse than you even know.”

“I must admit I froze too. It was very sudden and very surprising.”

“Right. And I don’t blame any of us for freezing, you didn’t hear his battle cry, the twisted rage was mostly directed at me. But who stepped forward to stop it? Me. Yeah, the troll who needs a stable influence. You didn’t, Terezi didn’t. No one did. Not even a random Sufferist. Though they wouldn’t have for fear Lereal would have killed them for siding with and assisting a highblood with anything. Even if it was common courtesy.” Karkat sighed. “He tried to kill me. His best motherfucking friend. He tried to murder me in place of Equius and Eridan and my stubborn, unyielding, angry self was able to face that and still calm his ass down. Maybe you should rethink your point of view.”

“Well, now that he’s calmer perhaps the both of you would benefit in finding another more apt moiral?”
“Kanaya, you’re really quickly becoming intolerable. I’m going to leave before we argue. Because I’m not going to pick a fight over my relationships with you. If you wanted to stabilize either of us perhaps you should have made your move earlier.” Karkat shook his head. “Really, if you had a crush on one of us that badly, you should have just said something. Don’t blame us if our lives are taking a different direction than what you think is right or the path we need. I think what might help the both of us right now is if nosy trolls stopped trying to govern our decisions like we never left the brooding caverns, and I don’t know… Maybe let us live? Like it seems like a strange and foreign concept, being able to make your own choices. But I really think it’s going to catch on. Even if it doesn’t, I think it’s a risk worth taking.”

“That is true,” Kanaya said. “Look, I am sorry if I caused offense. I do want to help this group in any way I can. But I cannot support a leader who would potentially sacrifice eleven lives for one - or sixteen lives now. Please remember our friends all look to you for guidance, and you’re responsible for more people than just Gamzee.”

“It’s not going to come to that,” Karkat said firmly. “Promise. Even if the worst happens, at least now we have room to run away.” Kanaya nodded, and they were quiet for a while. “Um, don’t take this as a solicitation, but are you happy with Aradia?”

Kanaya nodded again. “Yes, you have nothing to worry about on that score.”

“I wouldn’t have thought she needed enough pacifying to keep you happy. Since the, uh, accident, she’s been a bit quiet.”

“She no longer expresses emotions so enthusiastically as she did before, but that does not mean she no longer has them.”

“Good, that’s good. I guess I’ll leave you to it then. I should go keep an eye on Gamzee, you’re right, he needs more attention…”

“I’d advise you to avoid the basement for a while. Nepeta and Equius needed some time alone in there.”

“Oh, he’s finally taking the plunge? Good. Geez, I hope he finishes in time…”

“He’ll be fine,” Kanaya said, patting his arm. “Go see to your moirail, I’ll see to mine, let Nepeta handle hers.”

~~~

Nepeta had promised herself she wouldn’t cry. It wasn’t like Equius would be gone all that long. Technically he wouldn’t be gone at all, just… she tried to think of it as “unusually quiet”. It didn’t help much, but the sooner he went into the cocoon, the sooner he’d come out.

“You have my sylladex, yes? And my strife specibi?”

“Check and double-check!” Nepeta said, throwing a salute. “I’ll keep them safe.”

Equius nodded and finished folding his clothes, then sat naked on the floor. Blue strands were already extruding from his abdominal gland, and he twined them around his fingers as he talked. “Good. I admit I won’t be much help in this state, but I’d appreciate it if you still came and talked to me once in a while. If you have any problems I might be able to think them through while I’m in there.”

“I’ll talk to you every day, I purromise!” Nepeta knelt beside him and hugged him firmly. “Okay, if
you have any itches you might wanna scratch them now before your arms are glued up.”

Equius snorted quietly. “Thank you for that advice. I don’t suppose there’s anything else you wish you’d known before you cocooned?”

“You dream. It’s not like your regular dreams, and it’s not like the nightmares. But it feels real—sometimes you can take control of them, but for the most part you just go with it. I dreamt a lot about going for runs in the forest, and there was no one around. No trolls, no animals, just me and the flora. So don’t be surprised by your dreams. They might get scary too, but you just have to get through it.”

“Good to know, I’m not surprised, but it’s good to know. Anything else?”

“When you wake up you’ll want to stretch, shower, and eat all at the same time. I recommend stretching, showering, then eating… I can’t think of much more. Give me a minute.”

Equius nodded, still curling silk around his fingers, nervous about this, but glad that it was happening now, and not when they’d need him the most. He couldn’t hold it off forever and it would be best to just get it done. Being the first and only troll to pupate around the humans was odd, but they could be trusted. At least he was hoping so.

“I’ll talk to you efurry day, and I’ll make sure efurryone else does too. I’ll try to make sure we don’t leave you alone too much. The humans might fureak out a bit but maybe it’ll be better if they have a look. It’s not like a cocoon is scary. Do you mind if they look? I won’t let them damage you.”

“I can’t imagine they’d want to do anything too harmful. Yes, let them see me, we did agree to let them find out as much about trolls as they could, and besides… I think I’d miss them. They’re interesting creatu-I mean people, aren’t they?”

No sense putting it off any longer. He knelt up and started to wrap the strands around his back, Nepeta helping him make sure every spot was covered. The silk poured out ever faster now he wasn’t trying to block it, and soon he was able to sit with his knees drawn up and cover his legs with the blue substance.

“I’m going to miss you, Equius.” Nepeta was still wrapping him up.

“You’ll see me soon.” Equius had been tired lately, but it all seemed to hit him in that moment. He knew pupation came with a coma like sleep, he hadn’t been aware it would hit him so suddenly or directly. Nepeta smiled at him and he lazily returned the gesture.

The silk was sticking together, forming flattened sheets instead of strings, still soft enough to manipulate. Equius lay back, wrapping up his horns, and tucked his right arm up to his chest, his left hand clutching the last fold of silk. Nepeta planted a brief kiss on his forehead, and he drew the covering over his face.
Sitting down to a meal with all the trolls was borderline disgusting most times. All of them had voracious appetites and never learned manners; Kanaya was at least reasonably tidy with her eating, but the others were hopeless. Rose was starting to get used to it. They generally lead an interesting conversation, and even if their table manners left a lot to be desired they listened to any rebuking and looked like they tried to change a few of their habits.

Tonight they were sampling the great human cuisine of noodles with sauce, and the occasional ball of meat. So far the trolls seemed able to eat, and not get sick over any of the food they tried. The sauce was a bit meatier than normal. The trolls looked at the food the same way they always did before they tried something new; suspicious and nervous, but hungry, and their hesitation faded as they dug in. At some point Rose was going to have to make them eat a fully-loaded hamburger to see how they would react.

Eridan caught Jade looking at his eyepatch. She looked away hurriedly, but he shook his head and tapped the patch with a finger. “No, it’s okay, you can look.”

“Sorry, this might be rude, but are you missing an eye, or do you like just wearing the eyepatch?”

“Missin’ an eye,” Eridan said. There was no shame in his voice as he said it either.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be insensitive. I was just wondering if you liked wearing one because it made you more like a pirate or something.”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s not a problem. Though I do rather like havin’ the patch noww I’m used to it.”

“So, uh, am I allowed to ask how you lost the eye?” Eridan looked at the other trolls at the table and there was a brief moment of silent communication, before Eridan turned his attention back to Jade.

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“That’s okay, I’m curious, and I don’t have many stories myself.”
Dave shook his head at Jade’s comment. “Don’t listen to her, she has a bunch. But how did you lose an eye? Get in a fight with a pufferfish?”

Eridan puffed himself up, looking very much like the aforementioned fish. “I’ll have you knoww, it was a fight to the death wwith a dragon!”

“Wow, your planet has dragons?” John asked, eyes lighting up.

“Yours doesn’t?” Terezi scoffed. “Lame.”

“Okay, so, I wwas on my ship…” Eridan leaned forward, eye alight at the opportunity to brag. “This is back wwhen Wris and I were kismeses. There wwas this thunderin’ noise, it shook my boat, I started lookin’ around to find the source of the noise. Another roar, and I look up to the skies to see this dragon swwoop downw. He probably thought I wwould be a good snack or he wwanted to bring me home for his wwiggler to eat. He swwoops down, too close to my boat, and sets fire to the sails of my ship.” Eridan reached forward, grabbing the salt and pepper pots from the center of the table. He set the pepper over his plate, and the salt circled around the air above it. “My ship wwas my pride and joy, so I do my best to keep a calm head and adwance forwward. I knoww I can’t put the fire out myself. I call up my creww, and set them on putting out the fire. I kneww my ship could be lost, so I would take downw the miserable thin’ that ruined it.

“I’m not scared of a simple lusus, I had taken dowwn plenty before. To me it wwas just another day getting a lusus to feed Fef’s, nothin’ strange at all. I knoww I gotta attack this thin’ before it gets another lucky hit in on me. So I grab Ahab’s Crosshairs from my specibus, in attack mode I draww back and fire, the beam goin’ right through it’s wwing. My aim wwas a little off, but that’s alright, the dragon can’t stay in the air anymore.”

The salt shaker swiveled in the air, no doubt to reenact the motion the dragon made as it tried to correct its flight pattern, before it was slammed onto the table some distance away from Eridan’s plate but within reach.

“I can’t steer my ship,” Eridan continued. “It wwouldn’t be wwise anywayw, not wwith the fire tearin’ through it. I quickly assess the situation and dive into the ocean, swimmin’ towward the land it crashed into. I’m swimmin’ faster than I ever had before, mind focused on reweenge for the creature that thinks it could best me.” The pepper shaker was moving quickly towards the salt shaker. “I get to the land, and look around quickly. It left an obwious trail from wwhere it crash-landed into the ground. I hurry after it, ready for a fight, and it wwas an epic fight.”

The salt and pepper pots were now being mashed against each other, clinking in a mock battle.
Obviously Eridan was trying to show something about the fight, but really it just looked like they kept bumping into each other.

“I lose my gun but carry on with my claws. The dragon roars, movin’ forward with his own, draggin’ his claws along my face, takin’ my eye and giving me the scars on my face. Angry that I took his wing, but I’m angrier it tried to take my boat.” The salt and pepper shakers were moving against each other, still engaged in a heated mock battle. “It opens its mouth, ready to swallow me whole, its teeth diggin’ into my fin, when I manage to grab a nearby stick and jam it into its e-”

“Does it have to be a dragon?” Terezi interrupted. “Dragons are too cool to be taken down by you.”

Eridan glared and sourly said “Thank you so much for interruptin’.”

“C’mon, you wuss, my mom could take you down and she hasn’t hatched yet!”

“Who are you callin’ a wuss? Just because you’ve never taken down anythin’ more than a scalemate doesn’t mean you have to take it out on me.” Eridan shook his head. “All of you don’t have half the skills I have. You can admit it. I could take any of you in a fight!”

Gamzee flashed Eridan an eerie grin and wiggled his claws.

“… Except you Gam oh cod please don’t kill me,” Eridan mumbled, leaning away from him.

“Who said anything about killing you?” Gamzee said, looking towards his hands. “I made a promise I wouldn’t do nothing that had any risk in you ending up without a bloodbeat.”

“Stop it, Gam, I mean it.”

“Stop what? I ain’t doing nothing threatening, just wiggling my fingers. You got a problem with that?” Gamzee’s grin widened. “You really oughta loosen up a bit. Turn that frown upside-down, as the humans say.”

“You know damn well what you’re doing, Gam. Just stop, please. It’s not fucking funny.”
“You seemed to think it was before,” Gamzee sniggered, causing Eridan’s face to go rapidly from sickly pale to a deep violet blush.

John stared in bafflement. “Is that some kind of troll threat gesture?”

“Somefin like that,” Eridan mumbled, still cringing away from Gamzee.

John blinked for a moment, observing the way Eridan had curled up, then burst out laughing. “Oh my god. That’s why you keep tying your shoelaces so tight!”

The humans giggled, the trolls looking awkwardly at each other and faking laughter.

“Oh my god, you total total wuss!” Dave snickered.

“Yeah, laugh it up, guys, it’s not funny when he follows it up with a kick to the crotch,” Eridan grumbled, and looked offended when the humans laughed even harder. “Nep, did Equ leave any towels lying around? I need one so I can hide under it forever.”

“Oh, come on, you big baby, it’s funny!” John started to poke at Eridan’s ribs.

“Hey- oww! No! Quit it! Eek!” Eridan frantically slapped John’s hands away amid laughs from the other diners, the trolls joining in for real now.

“Pinch him, if you get him just right he squeaks!” Karkat suggested, grinning.

“You fuckin’ traitor!” Eridan wailed, his flailing hands knocking his empty glass off the table. John managed to land a jab, and had a second to be very surprised when his finger disappeared up to the second knuckle before Eridan’s fist met his face and he fell off his chair, the laughter from the rest of the table reaching a peak.

“Ow! Geez, do I just have a really punchable face by troll standards or something?”
Karkat and Terezi both started to open their mouths, but a warning look from Sollux and an ankle-kick from Vriska silenced them.

Eridan picked the fold of his shirt out of his gill, wincing. “Oww, that scratches… Quit poking those, Egbert human. I actually need my gills to breathe, you know - how’d you like it if I stuck my fingers up your nose?”

“Boys, no flirting at the table,” Dr Lalonde said absently, bringing a huge covered bowl out of the fridge and ignoring John’s indignant spluttering. “Now, not to dishparage John’s baking, but I’m sure ev’ryone would like a break from cake.” She giggled. “A poet and I didn’t know it.”

“Nah, I’m good with cake!” Terezi piped up.

“Ahem.” Dr Lalonde whipped the cover off the bowl with a flourish. “Hope you all like jello!”

The trolls stared in dead silence at the translucent green substance. The humans spooned some up and started eating as if nothing was wrong.

“Oh god,” Sollux whispered to Karkat. “They finally bring out thopor thlime and now they want uth to eat it? In public?”

“I’ll have it if you ain’t wanting it!”

Gamzee piled his plate high and started to shovel down the green stuff, the humans gaping at him.

“Well, it’s lovely to see a young man- troll, I mean, enjoying his food,” Dr Lalonde said, smiling. “Go easy there, pumpkin, you don’t wanna be sick.”

Gamzee slowed down after a few bites, ending up chewing slowly while staring at his spoon. “What’d you put in this?” he mumbled through a mouthful. “I mean, it’s not bad, but I ain’t thinking it’s working.”

“Working?” Rose asked. “I wasn’t aware jello was meant to ‘work’ in any way other than being delicious.” She took a dainty spoonful herself.
“Well, it’s good and everything, don’t get me wrong, but how’d you make it? It’s cold and sweet, and the high’s not kicking in.”

Everyone stared. Dave looked at his plate. “Dude, I don’t know how you do things on your planet, but here, weed usually goes in brownies. Though, you know, pot jello’s not a bad idea. I’ll have to talk to Bro.”

“David!” Rose rapped his knuckles with her spoon. “No encouragement of lawbreaking in front of the aliens.”

Karkat leaned over with a spoon and grabbed a bit of the jello. He looked nervous, and with the way the other trolls were watching him all the humans were pretty sure they thought the jello was poison. He took a bite, and chewed it slowly, then swallowed. “False alarm, it’s not sopor, just some sort of treat,” he mumbled, loud enough all of them could hear, but obviously embarrassed.

“In that case, Gamz, can I have mine back?”

“Go on ahead, lawsis, it’s real sweet though, just a warning.”

“I love sweet, lime-sweet.” Terezi took a bite. “Ohhh, it’s really good. Not better than cake but still good.” The rest of the trolls all took some of the jello and began to eat, each of them obviously feeling a bit awkward after finding out what they thought was wrong. Gamzee looked a little sad, but that didn’t stop him from eating.

“Pardon me, but what is sopor?” Rose asked. “And please wait to answer until you’ve swallowed and before shoving another bite in your mouth.”

“Eridan said something about it before, but didn’t you say you’re supposed to sleep in in, not eat it?” John asked through a mouthful, ignoring Rose’s instruction entirely.

“Uh, usually, yes, but it can be used for… other things.”

“He means drugs.”
"Thank you for that entirely unnecessary clarification, Terezi."

"Wait, so you guys literally sleep in drugs?" Dave was obviously trying to stifle his laughter.

"Well, no," Aradia added. "One must process sopor to make it a drug. The version we sleep in has a much more mild effect. Our race suffers from hivemind nightmares, sleeping in sopor is nearly necessary, lest we all don’t sleep, or do not get enough sleep."

“It’s like a sedative?” Jade asked, twirling her spoon in the jello. “Like sleeping pills or something similar?”

“Something like that, yeah,” Gamzee said. “Tends to leave a troll a bit funny in the head. Saps their fighting skills.”

Rose looked suspiciously at Gamzee. “You certainly seemed enthusiastic about eating it. Should I be concerned?”

Gamzee looked at Rose then down to his plate, pushing the jello around his plate. He wasn’t too sure how to respond to the question. He knew he couldn’t settle on being silent, or the question might get more forward.

“Gamzee…” Karkat spoke up for him. “He is a bit of a special circumstance, sopor tends to have a calming effect. Remember how I said highbloods have worse tempers? It was medically necessary, we’ll just leave it like that.”

“He’s been doing pretty okay without it though, he’s not too funny in the head.” Nepeta smiled as she spoke. “He’s got a good support system behind him.”

“Aww, that’s sweet,” Jade said. “Helping a friend like that.” She smiled, and Tavros blushed a little.

"Well, I’m glad he’s on the mend now. I was worried for a moment." Rose smiled. "Good luck keeping up the good work."
Dave leaned over towards Rose under the guise of reaching for more jello and whispered “Why the hell were you surprised? Look at that guy.”

Rose poked him with her spoon again.

~~~

Terezi rubbed the last of the blond dye into Dave’s hair, and inhaled happily.

“Hey, ‘Rezi, go easy there,” Dave said, brushing his wet fringe off his forehead and wiping the dye off his skin. “I’m pretty sure you can die from huffing that shit.”

“Aw, but it smells so good! When the yellow meets the white roots it’s like mixing up butter and sugar.” Terezi giggled, dopey from the fumes. “Pity you humans don’t know how good you smell. I’ll have to get the disguise on again some time, the crowd was amazing! Milk and strawberry and honey and chocolate and orange and licorice, and so many different colours of clothes…” She sighed, and started washing her hands. “Trolls all smell like ashes till you get up close. I could get to like this planet.”

“Thanks for the compliment. I sometimes forget how strange it is you see with your nose.”

“I can see with my tongue too, but, I don’t think most humans would take kindly to me walking up and licking them. Even if I’m pretty sure they’d taste like orange-creamsicles, or fudgepops. I smelled something I was pretty sure was cotton candy on a chocolate cone, and it smelled delicious.”

“Someday, I’m going to have to have you make a reference list for all the things you smell in a day.” Dave wrapped a towel around his bare shoulders and followed Terezi back to his bedroom. “Okay, this stuff has to stay on for twenty minutes, that’s time to get through a game level or two if you want. Unless your boyfriend’ll get jealous about you being in my room.” He winked.

“Why would Karkat be jealous? Two totally different quadrants there!” Terezi said, waving airily.

Dave blinked. “Wait, what? I was kidding!”
“What? Sorry, I thought you were pale-courting. Trolls don’t let just anyone play with their hair, you know!”

“Are you serious? I can’t tell if you’re serious.”

“No, really. Your hair is pretty close to your head and neck, trolls have to trust people pretty well to let them put sharp claws there!” Terezi was looking embarrassed for once in her life. “Sorry, I guess I misunderstood. If you don’t want-”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want. Just caught me off-guard. I’m cool with it. Hell, I’m absolute-zero.” Dave smiled and sat down. “So what, now I have an awesome alien chick for an official best bro?”

Terezi’s smile appeared once more. “I can make you an official card. As long as I get ‘human coolkid is my best bro’ as a card too.” She came and sat beside him, taking up the controller in her hands. Dave knew she had other methods of vision but she was still surprisingly good at video games for a blind girl.

“Of course, it’s like secret club passes. Only the coolest of kids and aliens get the official cards. Anything I need to know before we get the cards laminated? I have to make sure I can keep my membership at full access."

“Just make sure I’m not doing something stupid, and I’ll make sure you aren’t. We’ll help each other get better.”

“Got it.”

Terezi grinned and shifted closer to him, extending her tongue. “And we teach each other new skills, too…”

~~~

“Guys? Dave, I need to borrow a pencil sharpener, can I come in or are you and Terezi, uh, busy?”

“It’s okay, you can come in,” came Dave’s voice, strangely muffled, and a cackle from the troll.
John opened the door, saw Dave, and stopped, staring.

“What?”

“… Okay, is there any particular reason you’re letting Terezi shove crayons up your nose?”

“Actually, the left one’s chalk.” Dave pointed to his desk. “Pencil sharpener’s in the top drawer.”

John wrinkled his nose at the smell of dye as he rummaged through the drawer. “Maybe you should open a window.”

“Good idea. You’ll never be able to distinguish any smells in this, Dave. Thanks, John!”

“I was thinking more so you don’t die, but whatever.”

John headed back downstairs and found the living room in its now-normal state of chaos. Vriska and Rose were happily mock-fencing with knitting needles, Rose’s actual knitting lying abandoned on the floor. Gamzee was nervously clutching his stuffed dragon with one hand and trying to pull Karkat away from Aradia with the other; Karkat was shouting in Alternian and waving around the Coraline DVD Aradia had borrowed. Jade, Tavros, and Eridan were sitting at the table, having a quiet conversation, which seemed relatively normal until John realised Jade was speaking in an odd pidgin which was as close as human vocal chords could get to Alternian and the trolls were sprinkling their sentences with extremely bad Chinese. Sollux was elbow-deep in the disembowelled remains of the TV, and John wasn’t sure he wanted to know what the troll was trying to make it do. He groaned. “Okay, Rose, can I borrow your car keys? Thank you. I can’t take this weirdness anymore, I’m going out to the movies.”

“Ooh! Let me get the facepaint and I’ll come too-”

“Alone, thank you, Nepeta.”

~~~
“Why the grubfucking hell did you think it was a good idea to watch this?!?” Karkat shouted at Gamzee, jabbing his finger at the DVD. “I saw enough to get the gist, doesn’t it hit just a little too close to home? And you!” He whirled on Aradia. “Why would you think anything remotely along these lines was a good thing to show to Gamzee?”

“Hey, Karbro, really, I’m okay, cool your rumble globes…” Gamzee tried to calmingly rub Karkat’s shoulder, and was shrugged off. “Okay, it freaked me the fuck out, but it’s just a motherfucking movie. I ain’t too scared of fakey-fake scary things no more. And ain’t you the one who said we should be speaking Earthian in front of the spacemonkeys?”

“Do you want them to know what we’re saying right now?”

“Point taken.”

“I am sorry, both of you,” Aradia said, the living side of her face creased in an apologetic expression. “I thought it would help.”

“How would it help?”

“We know monsters exist. Movies like this show they can be defeated.”

“I don’t think lopping off the fishbitch’s hand and throwing it down a well will help overmuch.”

“Don’t be so literal, I’m the robot here, I should be the one who fails at metaphors.” Aradia had never expressed emotions as obviously as she used to since her accident, but there was a definite twinkle in her eye, and the boys couldn’t help but smile a little in turn.
“Well, guess who just broke his personal bench-press record!” John said, mopping sweat from his reddened brow and grinning as he walked into the living room.

“Well done!” Rose said, looking up from the slightly clumsy embroidery in her hand; Kanaya took the opportunity to adjust Rose’s grip on the needle. “You’ve certainly come a long way from when we first met.”

“Hey, I still weigh the same as I did then,” said John, flexing his arms.

“Yes, but you have gained six inches and reduced your daily sugar intake significantly… wait, John, what’s that on your arm?”

"Oh!" John rolled up his T-shirt sleeve for better inspection. "Sorry, I guess it’s a bit tactless after last week. I just got to thinking about Alternian script. I thought it was pretty, and I wanted a tattoo of some. I asked Kanaya, and she said this is a traditional one, she drew it on with a marker. Please don’t tell Gamzee? I don’t want him to hit me again. I really don’t mean to be rude about his thing.”

Karkat looked up from sharpening his sickles and peered at the script, and started snickering.

"What?"

“‘Lupa pevuhi ja lotenjaneyak xineeru’?” Karkat made sure to say it with just his middle vocal chord, trying to ignore how weird it felt and sounded.

“What? What does it mean?”

“Roughly speaking, it means ‘I’m too dumb to read this tattoo’.”

John looked down at his arm, then sighed. “It looks so cool though… Dammit.”

Jade started laughing. “Don’t be so disappointed, John. I mean what did you expect? Maybe if we
ask nicely you could get an actual word of your choosing permanent-markered on to your arm.”

“Your guys’ script would make awesome henna. I just wish it didn’t say I was too dumb to read it.” John shook his head.

“Don’t lie to him, Karkat! It does not say you’re ‘too stupid’ to read it,” Kanaya said, stifling a laugh. “Merely that you are not able to read it.”

Rose caught Kanaya’s eye, and their lips twitched in matching subtle smiles. Rose murmured “How delightfully passive-aggressive.”

“That’s bad enough! Oh well, other than you guys no one knows what it says, so I can pretend it says something else.”

Jade’s eyes widened. “John, no, just no. You’ve gotten into the mindset of all those people with bad Japanese and Chinese tattoos. I refuse it. No, no you can’t do this.”

Nepeta giggled, and went back to watching her computer. She sighed.

“What’s that?” Dave asked, peering over her shoulder. She paused the video on a shot of what appeared to be a webcam view of herself and Equius, much younger, both looking completely horrified.

“Oh, I was just missing the good old days,” Nepeta said, shrugging. “Back when we were kids, we all made reaction videos to this stupid shock site.” She pressed play again, and the younger version of herself continued squealing in horror while the younger Equius ran off camera, his disappearance rapidly followed by a sound which was probably him vomiting. “I remember he got offended by just about everything but this was about the only one which ever really disturbed him.” She giggled.

“Shock site? What was it?”

Nepeta blushed. “Um, I’m not sure if I should show you, it’s a bit embarrassing and after the confusion last week I’m not sure you’d get it.”
“Oh god, Nepeta, no. I never want to see that video again. I had blocked it out all these sweeps, now it’s back replaying in my mind. If you’ll all excuse me I have to force some type of scooping device into my eyesockets and make these images go away.”

“I wasn’t watching the video, just our reactions to it!” Nepeta said, still smiling a little. She clicked another link and this time Eridan was on the screen as the video buffered. He blinked at whatever was in front of him and looked away in disgust, then glanced back at it and his jaw dropped in horror, his mouth emitting a stunned squeak. A buzzing giggle sounded offscreen and the young Eridan shrieked something which was probably the Alternian equivalent of “oh god, what the hell is wrong with you?”

Dave squinted, trying to make out the reflection in the onscreen Eridan’s glasses. “Okay, what the hell is this video that’s making everyone puke? Troll 2 Girls 1 Cup?”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t ask.”

“It was some shock video, a bunch have come out.” Karkat shook his head. “It was pretty disturbing, and Sollux started the whole thing. We all got roped into recording a reaction video for it. I don’t exactly know if it would be shocking to humans, you don’t quite understand the culture around it.”

“We can always learn culture, you can tell a lot by a nation by what freaks them out,” Jade said with a smile. “We’ve expressed our interest in your culture, just like we’ve forced you into experiencing ours.”

“ Seriously, we want to know what is freaking you all out. It’s gotta be good, you come from a planet where your neighbor could be killed and you’d still be doing your knitting saying ‘oh, it’s just another Tuesday night’. I want to know what freaks you out.”

Karkat looked at Nepeta and shook his head, then said something in Alternian that presumably translated as “god damn it”. She shrugged and looked back at the screen with a small smile twisted with nervousness.

“It’s not like it’ll be too shocking the second time around, we know what happens. Plus, there is always the warning that is on after. We know they aren’t actually…”
“I don’t know if it’s a good idea, Nepeta…” Karkat sighed. “Let me do something real quick, and don’t show them it until I get a handle on some things okay?”

Nepeta nodded then saluted as Karkat headed for the basement. “While he’s doing whatever I can show you the rest of the reaction videos. It give you a chance to see all of us when we were about six.”

“Forgive me, but how old is six in your years?”

“Umm, I don’t know. We’re close to adulthood now, so.. that was.. two, three sweeps ago.”

“They were thirteen or fourteen,” Jade said, doing some quick mental math. “At least I’m pretty sure.”

“Every time they mention their ages I think they are like children still. Not adults.”

“We were wigglers when we watched it, now we’re adults. More like your.. umm, teenagers? Not really kids but not quite adults.” Nepeta clicked another link, and loaded up another video. “We were all so cute back then. Oh, I forgot, this was around when Gamzee first met Karkat… face to face. They knew each other over chat before that. We all knew each other by this time. Maybe we hadn’t all met face to face yet, but we knew each other. I can’t remember if Sollux was with them, but he was and still is really good at avoiding cameras.”

“Oh, they were cute kids - wait, is Gamzee wearing clown makeup there?” John looked disturbed. “Geez, I can’t even escape clowns in outer freakin’ space…”

“Yeah, that was kind of his thing.” Nepeta pressed play. The onscreen Karkat flailed and yelled, looking completely disgusted, while Gamzee blinked stupidly. Onscreen Gamzee said something, to which Karkat responded with even more yelling. Nepeta translated:

“‘Hey, yellow and blue makes green, does this mean it’s gonna make a batch of little Nepetas?’”

“‘You don’t even understand why this is supposed to be shocking, do you?’”
“Well, that was the gist. The direct translation would have more swearing.” Nepeta smiled, nostalgia hitting her right in the bloodpusher. The humans were looking at the monitor, confused, as Karkat kept yelling at Gamzee. One of his not-so-rare but always fun rants; she didn’t think it was worth translating. Karkat’s rants were always full of weird Alternian references that she’d have to explain.

“Karkat used to rant for hours,” Nepeta said with a little glance back. “He could go and go and go, and it would cover all sorts of topics. The next sweep he started changing a lot. Right around when Aradia went to… He and I were dating shortly after this. It’s a whole mess, our pasts, but Karkat’s been pretty steady. We cut him off now if he’s going to start but he’s learned how to keep his rants short too.” She shook her head. “Gamzee was so sweet and dopey back then, he couldn’t really role-play, but he’d still try, and he was really funny, in his own way. Gosh, I was so different too the more I think about it. Equius hasn’t changed much. Neither has Eridan - well, I think he has, he just doesn’t want to bring it up. Vriska was always Vriska…”

“Even though this looks and sounds like chaos to us, I get how looking back can be weird,” John said, sitting down next to the cattroll. “We used to make weird movies when we were younger. We couldn’t see each other through the school year, so we’d all write a script. Then act out our parts and really poorly edit them together, rewatching them is almost embarrassing… But we have the memories.”

“Thanks, and I’m glad you understand. Oh shoot, I nearly forgot to show you all of us!” Nepeta smiled at John and pulled up another video of them when they were younger. “Here we go, I’ll show you all twelve of us being silly.”

“At some point, I might have to show you the four of us being silly.”

The watched through the other trolls’ videos, all of them equally disgusted. Even Vriska seemingly tried to hide behind her unflappable exterior though she was obviously flapped. Karkat returned at some point, a few other trolls behind him. He was playing with the claw on his thumb as all of the newcomers went to find a place to sit.

“Yeah, that’s cute,” Dave said, a slight but genuine smile on his face. “But now I gotta see this video you were all yelling about! Come on, you can’t tease us like that.”

“You can show them if you want, Nepeta, but you’re probably going to have to go to another site, the first one we watched it on got pulled by the Empire because of copyright. No doubt there’s another version somewhere.”

Nepeta opened a site which looked like a search engine, typed something in, and soon found a new
site. Despite the Alternian script, the humans gathered instantly that it was a porn site; some concepts travel between cultures pretty well, and the lurid site design gave it away even before they saw the grainy screenshots when Nepeta scrolled down. Dave, of course, leaned closer.

“Okay, where is it… ah!” Nepeta found the section with the appropriate video and clicked. The humans watched, holding their breath in anticipation.

At first it seemed to be nothing particularly special; two trolls, a yellowblood female and a teal male, nude in a pile of pillows, backed up with the odd screechy noises which trolls called music. The yellowblood did seem to have a number of fresh burn wounds, but from what they knew of troll behaviour that wasn’t anything unusual. The trolls all looked disgusted already, and the humans assumed they knew what was coming. Things proceeded apace, and for the first fifteen seconds or so the only surprise the humans got was how similar troll and human mating practices were, ambiguous genitalia aside.

The tealblood reached up to his mate’s face, and patted her cheek gently, whispering a “shoosh” sound, again and again.

The humans looked at the faces of their troll companions, all of whom were clearly uncomfortable at best. Jade and Dave looked at each other and shrugged, then went back to watching.

“Oh God, this is the worst part,” Karkat whispered, and everyone tensed.

The female troll in the video lifted herself out of the pile, and produced a bucket. The troll viewers squealed or groaned as the sounds of fluid hitting metal drowned out the unbearably irritating background music, and the video ended.

Karkat looked expectantly at the humans. “Well, are you happy now, you sick fucks?”

Dave looked back at the screen. “Dude, do all troll chicks have dayglo banana slugs for clits?”

“Umm.” Terezi looked around the room obviously trying to find Dave. “What’s a clit? Are you asking about our bulges? Or is that some special word you call girl bulges?”

“I’m out,” John said trying to stand up. “I’m not having this conversation.”
Jade put her hand on John’s shoulder. “Perhaps it would be better to ask why that was shocking, because other than… well, I don’t even know how to say it, other than it looked like two trolls using the bathroom in a bucket. I don’t understand.”

“My question was a serious one,” Dave said with a shrug. “I want to know about the girl’s banana slugs.” John was shaking his head, while burying it into the palms of his hands.

“Uh, yeah, that part was normal. Why, what do human bulges look like?”

Dave looked down at his own crotch and muttered “Less easy to find in the dark. Huh, somehow I figured that would be more off-putting.”

“Daaave!” John groaned, face scarlet.

“Fine, John, fine, at some point we’re going to talk to the trolls about the differences between men and women though. It’s going to have to happen. We can pair it off it a talk about the birds and the bees.”

“Dave,” John groaned again. “Okay, so, what was so shocking?” he half muttered into his hands.

“Remember how I said the culture part would take forever to explain, and you probably wouldn’t get it? I see we’ve reached this part of the discussion. Obviously, no one wanted to listen to my first warning, so here we are having to explain this even thou-”

“Somebody want to tell us the thing that is so shocking about the video?” Rose interjected.

Karkat huffed and crossed his arms. “Well, in the video, the yellowblood and the tealblood are… ketamisen. Uh. Moirails… They’re not in a pail- I mean a quadrant you’d usually have sex in. Actually you shouldn’t ever have reproductive sex in. Doing so and getting caught is a humiliating death sentence.” Karkat rolled his eyes.

Dave’s insufferable smirk vanished. He shuffled closer to Terezi and whispered “Rezi, you said it was okay for us to make out!”
“It was!” Terezi protested, also whispering. “Making out with your moirail is… well, it’s a bit unusual but it’s certainly not a death sentence.”

“Actually, she’s right on that,” Nepeta added, having overheard, then spoke in a normal volume. “Kissing your moirail is okay. Even Equius didn’t freak out when I offered to teach him to kiss when we were kids. And in exchange he taught me how to wire my own jawbone.” She giggled. “Yeah, that really didn’t go well, but it’s funny now. You’re just… really, really not supposed to do anything which might make grubs.”

“It’s perfectly fine for moirails to help their partner learn and grow, but making grubs is a whole other thing. Like, say if you have a matesprit but are unsure you moirail can help you through it.”

“Or if you have self-esteem problems, that can sometimes help, especially if you flipped pale from red,” Feferi added, holding Sollux’s hand.

“Or if you’re really bored,” Terezi snickered, looking at Dave.

Karkat looked disgusted again, but continued. “But there should never be a… bucket involved.” He nearly choked part way through his sentence. “Buckets have the immediate connotation in our society of being how genetic material is delivered to the Mother Grub… So to have you and your moirail donate to the slurry is a very bad thing. Usually the grubs are mutants, malformed, and get culled. It’s basically like announcing you’re too weak to breed, and it can taint the whole sweep’s batch if it’s not caught in time.” The humans were nodding; though obviously part of the culture was lost, they were trying to understand. “In the video, the immediate use of piles and shoosh— um, -papping. Shooshpapping? That sounds dumb in human. Anyway, it is obvious moirallegiance, that’s not too bad, but when the bucket is brought out…” Karkat swallowed and looked at Nepeta.

“It tends to break even the strongest of trolls.” She was smirking a bit as she ended Karkat’s sentence. “It’s not unusual to see niche porn with moirails, but showing them breeding is a big Empire no-no.”

Terezi nodded. “The trolls who made the movie ended up being executed. Even though that warning says they aren’t actually moirails, they are actors, but the Empire obviously doesn’t want trolls to get any ideas when it gets down to drone time.” Karkat snorted in laughter, but didn’t offer any explanation. “I hope this makes sense, like you understand how we find it shocking. It’s like some of the things in your movies we don’t understand.”
“Of course your stupid language isn’t helping me explain,” Karkat said. “Seriously, why do you have to have the words for ‘pale’ and ‘pail’ sound exactly the same?”

“Well we only use pails to move water, or for cleaning. You could say bucket or moirail, I guess. But it is making some sense, just not a bunch of it. I think what’s more shocking to us is the… um, nature of your porn. Like how you physically look. But we know that’s not shocking to you.”

“Obviously.” Terezi grinned. “So what do humans have down there, or don’t we want to know? Well, I want to know, but this bunch of wusses probably won’t.”

“Um, did I walk in at the wrong time?” came Gamzee’s voice from the doorway.

“I don’t think there is a right time to walk in on a conversation like this,” said John, shrugging and shooting him a sympathetic glance. “You may want to leave.”

“What is we speaking of?”

“The reproductive system of humans and trolls.”

“Yeah, I might want to… Nah, you know fuckin’ what? No, I’ll motherfucking stay.” He moved slowly, joining the group, but keeping a bit of a distance; just in case this made him more nervous than he could handle, he could find an excuse to leave and not be really in anyone’s way. There was another noise, like a slight cough.

“I came into this conversation late, but I want to know.” Vriska was standing further back, holding a glass in her hand. “I wonder if it’s weird.”

“Weirder than your slugs?” Dave said raising an eyebrow. “I doubt it.”

“Okay, so you have a… bulge, was it?” Rose said, her trusty notebook already in hand. “And also an opening in which to put it? Well, to grossly oversimplify things, humans only have one or the other. Usually-” she glanced briefly at Dave, “-males have the appendage and females the orifice.”

Vriska nodded. “We have both, a bulge and a nook. Though how it works is males tend to have the
Karkat’s forehead was against his palm. “We’re having this conversation. This is actually happening. Oh god. This is happening.”

“Don’t be such a prude, we’re all adults now,” Terezi said. “So you guys only have one or the other? Sounds weird, but okay. I can understand that. Even if it would make delivering your material difficult. Do girls have a hard time aiming?”

“Uh, no, expelling stuff is a male thing,” Jade said, giggling a little. “Mammals, remember? The male leaves his… ‘genetic material’, heehee - sorry, that’s just such a funny way to say it - inside the female, and it joins with her DNA inside, and grows into a baby in there.”

Vriska and Karkat looked even more horrified than they had been during the shock video.

“No, she’s right,” Tavros piped up. “I guess you, uhh, might not know much about it because your lusii weren’t mammals.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have known anyway,” Terezi said with a shrug. “My lusus never hatched. Gamzee and I are competing for the most absent lusus award. So really, you grow grubs inside you?” Terezi thought she might have been turned toward Rose or Jade. Instead John got the brunt of the question.

“Yes, women do grow the babies, we don’t call them grubs, inside them.”

“That’s toooooooo creepy,” Vriska said with a little shiver. “And pretty gross, no offense.”

“Oh, it’s fun when you’re hunting!” Nepeta said. “It’s like getting a prize in your breakfast cereal, except with meat!”

She blinked, hurt, as the humans shuffled away from her.
Bec’s ears perked up, and he sat up with a friendly rumbling sound.

"What is it, boy?" Jade asked, then looked up from where she sat on the couch. A shadow fell over her from behind, and she recognised the shape of Gamzee’s horns. "Oh, hi."

“Can’t sleep, sis? Usually by this time your spacemonkey flock is all up and sleeping. So are we, for that matter.”

Jade smiled a little, moving her book over her knee. She didn’t know why but somehow even if Gamzee could be a little freaky looking, the sentiment in him wondering if she was having problems sleeping warmed her heart. She looked at the clock - it was already early morning, about the time the trolls did go to sleep now - and shook her head.

“It’s summer, I sometimes stay up late reading, or watching movies… Even though I’m with my friends sometimes I like to be alone and have Jade quiet time. For some reason the best time to do it is at night.”

“Oh, I all be understanding that. Sometimes it’s nice to be alone and just let your thinkpan move where it wants. No need to worry about other people or trolls. Just getting into yourself and being with yourself. I lived for a long time all alone, so I don’t like it all that much anymore, but I can understand. I’ll be leaving you to your quiet time. When you sleep, hope it gets itself around you well.”

“Oh, don’t feel you have to leave if you don’t want to!” Jade patted the couch beside herself. “Come sit down if you’re lonely.”

Bec wuffed happily and bumped his head against Gamzee’s hand. The troll smiled and ruffled the dog’s ears. “I like your not-lusus,” he said, still petting. Bec leaned against his hand, mouth open and tongue out. “He’s really nice. So are you, for the record, all of you are all very nice.”

“Seems Bec likes you too. At some point we should take you all to meet Maplehoof. I think you might like her too. Maybe we should bring her up here, that way nobody would see you guys… Are you lonely, Gamzee?”

“I don’t do so well on my lonesome, my thinkpan starts working and I can’t make it stop. Makes me want sopor again when I get all like that. But I ain’t going to be one of those trolls who gets all ruined off of it. I promised myself when I quit I’d never go back, and I’d get myself clear-headed.”

“That’s a good goal to have,” Jade said with a smile. Gamzee found a place on the floor and sat, looking towards her for a moment. She picked up her book with the intention of putting in a bookmark and carrying on with it later. He looked like he wanted to talk, and she looked at him quizzically.

“You can read, it don’t mind me none. I’m fine to just sit, and let you do whatever. It ain’t about conversation or something, it’s just being close…”

Jade nodded. “Well, if you’re sure,” she said. Gamzee gave her a little nod, before shifting, finding somewhere more comfortable on the floor. She opened her book back up and began reading. Part way through the next chapter she looked up and found him apparently content with just sitting there, staring at the wall. “Gamzee, what are you doing?”
“Trying to get my thinkpan to turn off long enough I might be able to do something other than think.”

“That looks so boring, come here.”

Gamzee looked at her for a moment, before he moved forward to her slowly. “I don’t want to be bothering you, I can all leave.”

“It’s no hassle, really. I have plenty of time to read.” When Gamzee was close enough she moved her hand forward to his shoulder she could feel how tense he was. “Have you slept at all?”

“Sometimes sleep isn’t something that comes to me with any ease. I just pray it comes at the dawn, if it doesn’t it doesn’t.”

“You must be tired.” Jade pulled him over gently, trying to ignore how robotic his motions were. It was obvious he was nervous. She took a curl of Gamzee’s hair between her fingers and rubbed it. “I like your hair. Geez, it looks really tangle up, though - isn’t that uncomfortable?”

"Yeah, I never was one for taking much care of it." Gamzee shrugged. "It’s a bit hard to reach it all with my motherfucking horns in the way. Then, I sort of…” Gamzee trailed off, not wanting to say he’d lost most of the will to care for himself at all. That involved nudity and touching his skin. “…put it off when we was in motherfucking space.” It was a good enough excuse.

"Oh, that sounds like a pain. Do you want me to give you a hand?" Jade decaptchalogue'd her comb, and gestured.

Gamzee moved slowly, worried about turning his back to her. Not because she was threatening, but he had a series of scars on the back of his neck he wasn’t sure if he wanted her to see. Though there was a chance she might not see them or recognize them. He couldn’t exactly turn her down. This was a test to see if she would make a good moirail, and this was a great quiz. He shrugged, if he put his toe in he might as well dive. He turned around slowly, Jade grabbed onto his shoulders and helped him navigate back to she could easily reach his hair.

“Thanks for this, brainysis.”

“Brainysis?”

“You know all sorts of things, brain is the human word for being well schooled right? So, I figured it all fit you.”

“Aww.” She picked a knot out of his hair. “That’s funny. You know, when I first met you I thought you were kind of scary looking, but you’re really nice.”

He relaxed a little as she kept combing, then tensed as her fingers brushed the scar above his shirt collar.

“Oh, sorry, did I hurt you?”

“No, no, just…” He turned his collar up, making sure the marks were covered properly. “Well, okay, a bit. I got a cut there a while back and it stings sometimes. Keep going, just let me keep that covered.” Jade nodded and kept brushing, humming softly enough that she didn’t realise she was doing so until Gamzee said “That’s a real pretty song, sis.”

“Oh, it’s just a little lullaby thing. It might help.”
“Something from your grubhood- sorry, the mammal version of grubhood?”

“Sort of, I listened to it a lot in my teens when I was lonely. Boarding school sucks on the first night, you can be sleeping in a dormitory full of other girls and still feel totally alone. Especially since I couldn’t bring Bec.” She shrugged, and started to sing quietly. “Little child, be not afraid, though rain pounds harshly against the glass like an unwanted stranger, there is no danger, I am here tonight… I’ll have to teach you some songs. Eridan tried to teach me a couple of troll songs, but I don’t think it’s physically possible for humans to pronounce them. Maybe we could just do the middle notes and let you guys handle the rest?”

“Fishbro’s been getting to know you and Johnbro pretty well, ain’t he?”

Jade giggled. “Yeah, I still think his thing about John is kind of funny…” She looked at the comb in her hand, then back to Gamzee. “Oh, oh dear, I’m sorry - is this a… pale thing? Should I not be doing this?”

“No, no, it’s okay,” he hastily assured her. “Karbro says if it’s with a human it doesn’t count unless the human wants it to.” He tried to look up at her without turning his head. “Speaking of spending time with humans, what might you be thinking on the topic of Tavros?”

“He’s very nice,” Jade said after a moment of thought. “But I don’t think that is what you are asking me about.”

“Oh, I was just kinds of motherfuckin’ wondering what you thought of all of us. I look pretty scary, but I’m nice. I just wonder what it’s like for the humans to all get to know us. Sometimes you can learn the most about yourself if you look through someone else’s eyes. And all that.” He wasn’t sure which troll had told him the phrase perigees or sweeps before, but he was glad for it. It made coming up with an excuse easier. It wasn’t a lie, just an excuse to talk about Tavros.

“Your hair when brushed is actually really long. I’m sure if I were to straighten it it would be even longer.” Jade pulled a section of hair straight with the comb. “Wow, it is pretty long, and you wouldn’t know it unless you brush it out.” Jade took a moment. “As far as your question, I think all of you are surprisingly nice. I mean you have your quirks but I can’t expect an alien race to have the same values as the human race. None of you have done anything so massively taboo I’d hate you forever. I guess I’m pretty open minded though. When I was younger my grandpa would take me all over the word. Though I don’t really want to go back to the Philippines. Not because of the people but… I thought balut was taboo enough to make me stay away. It’s a little unfair, maybe I’ll get over it and go back and just ignore that so I can look at the rest of the culture.”

“I be meaning like things of specifics. Just motherfuckin’ curious how you all see us.”

“On the topic of Tavros, he’s really nice. If a little awkward, he could use some work on presenting a stronger image. But I can tell he’s strong when it really matters. It just doesn’t come off that way all the time. Sometimes he can be really nervous too… I’m really susceptible to things like that. When other people get nervous or embarrassed I get nervous or embarrassed for them… But he’s really sweet, and looks like he needs a lot of good friends, and good company, he looks like he’s had a lot of hardships in his life and I’d like to help him out to not have more… Y’know? I can’t imagine losing my legs, It’s pretty cool how he doesn’t really let it bother him. Or keep him down.”

“Yeah, poor guy’s not been too lucky most of his life, and all his good luck seems to link back to bad luck. I mean, he got new legs, but he needed them in the first place, if you get me? And the wings look motherfucking awesome, but back home that was one more thing that would get him killed. Not to mention they get in the way. He says he’s not interested in a kismesis, but I think it’s just that no troll could stand up to the mutual hate-on he’s got with doorways.” Gamzee paused while Jade
chuckled. “And he and Eridan broke up not so long ago, which kind of sucked for them both, so he’s needing a new moirail too.”

Jade frowned. “Didn’t you say moirlais were supposed to stop each other becoming dangerous? I don’t know if Tavros would need that.”

“It also counts to stop ‘em being dangerous to themselves. Tav’s still a bit… sensitive, and sometimes he needs a boost and some good advice.”

Jade tried to part Gamzee’s hair between his horns. “You really love him, don’t you?”

“I pity him hard… So I guess, yeah I do love him, by human standards. I have for a really long time. When we was about motherfuckin’ six sweeps I asked him if he was interested, and he put me down all gently, told me he thought he might have a crush on Vriska. It was a complicated motherfuck. But in the end… He started to show signs back at it becoming something, right before conscription. Shit then got complicated, but I do pity him… A lot.”

“Karkat wasn’t lying when he said that the only thing that gets trolls other than conquering is romance,” Jade said with a giggle. “So why’d they, Eridan and Tavros, break up?”

“Fishbro’s a little strong for Tavros, they split amicably. At the time Eridan really needed someone who understood his circumstance. Tavros did, and they became a thing. It was short lived but I think good for the both of them.”

“You guys’ relationship history must be complicated. I’m surprised there are so few sore feelings.”

“If it’s not fuckin’ serendipity trolls are understanding.”

“You guys believe in destiny, like a destined soulmate?”

“If I’m translating this right, yeah, it’s sort of the biggest thing ever. Trolls are always searching for their destined other half, their destined pitypartner, their unbreakable diamond, their fated hatemate, their trinity of ash-allies. It’s a frequent fuckin’ plotline in romance movies. But trolls do believe in fate in other things too. Like I am in the thinking that coming here was fate for us.”

“For a species that thinks killing is a fun recreational hobby you guys are surprisingly romantic.”

“I’m weirder than the other trolls, I got faith behind me. They don’t really, there is other religious stuff around, but really the religion I’m a part of is obscure because we keep it that way. Tavros always told me that if I was as dedicated to my mates as I was to my faith I’d make anyone happy to have me.” Gamzee smiled a little. “I always told him he was too sweet to be from Alternia… Maybe opposites do attract.”

“Oh, don’t say that! You’re really nice too.”

Gamzee was sure Jade was wrong, but he didn’t say so. Everything was going so well, he’d keep it that way.

“Ooh! Hold still.” Jade decaptchalogued some green and black ribbons, and giggled. Gamzee blinked at them. “Come on, you’ll look so cute!”

Gamzee was not sure he wanted to look cute even if ribbons could make him so, but he stayed still and let her weave them through his curls and around his horns. He felt odd dressed up like this, though his head did feel much lighter. Maybe since the bulk of the work was done, he would just keep it this way. Not with the ribbons, but brushed.
“There we are,” Jade said, moving quickly to take in her work. “You look so cute!” Jade had a smile that was contagious, and Gamzee seemed to have caught it. He still didn’t know if he wanted to be cute, but he approved of Jade smiling.

“You got a mirror?” He took the face-powder compact she handed him, opened it, and looked in the little mirror inside. He smiled a little - he looked pretty weird with the bows. Not all that bad, though… Voices whispered in his head, familiar ones. He looked like a girl.

He swallowed, bringing up his hand to yank them out, but stopping just shy of actually doing that. He came here for a reason. He couldn’t let himself lose that goal. He looked at the ribbons his hand still stuck in the position of going to pull them out and trying to complete his mission. The voice in his head was getting louder, scolding him, teasing him, knowing exactly what to say that broke him down. He could feel his chest tighten; he was finding it hard to breathe, when Jade’s voice cut through his consciousness.

“Are you okay? You spaced out there a bit.”

“Huh? Oh, f-fine. I just… can I take these out now?”

“Aw, let me get a picture first!” Jade protested, holding up her phone.

Gamzee stayed still and pasted on a smile till the flash went off, then started picking out the ribbons. He paused as he got to the last one; a floppy black bow at the back of his neck, holding his hair in a loose ponytail, most of the curls at the front still hanging over his face. He looked back in the mirror. That one… that actually looked pretty good, insofar as he ever felt he looked good these days. He pulled the bow tighter to secure it and turned his head to see it better in the mirror. Not girly enough to set his panic off, and he couldn’t help but notice that with his hair rearranged he looked just a tiny bit less like his ancestor. Yeah…

“Mind if I keep this one?”

“Go on ahead!” Jade’s smile seemed wider. It didn’t creep him out as much as usual wide smiles did. “You know for an alien you can be pretty handsome once you get past all the…” Jade tapered her sentence off. “Sorry, I don’t mean to offend you. Sometimes I say things without thinking…”

“It’s all good. The scars…” He looked over at her. “I can see how they’d look scary or be unsettling. Especially to you all. I don’t think you’d ever see this kind of damage without the human being all cold and a corpse.”

“Also, how nonchalant how all of you are with death is unsettling,” Jade said, smoothing out the ribbons on her lap.

“Ain’t nothing to shy from. Death is coming for everything. It comes and when it does ain’t nothing you can do to be stopping her.” Gamzee paused. “Si nahaku kiuyisa; Sutsen kas Zekasi.” He gave a little smile. “Basically, Death comes to everyone, we all face judgement. That ain’t Alternian, but my church’s language. Best not to be repeating it, since I ain’t suppose to motherfucking share it with the non-faithful. Didn’t say no nothing about explaining cultural distinctions with monkey-aliens though.”

Jade recaptchalogued the ribbons and smiled at him. “Oh, that’s kind of cool. I didn’t know you were bilingual, or trilingual if English counts… But yeah, but it’s a sad affair, dying in general. But then again we don’t live under the threat of constant death that you do.” She shrugged. “Cultural difference and I can accept it.”
“So what were you all reading? Never been big on the written word in the book-type. A slampoem is all being okay though. But I should be getting my schoolfeeding on about the kinds of thing you all like to do and find to be entertaining.”

“It’s a horror novel, well, more a thriller… I don’t really know how to describe this. There is a couple and they are having fun, and being with each other… Then he dies, it’s accidental, but she’s left handcuffed to a bed, she has to escape. Wow, I’m terrible at describing books. I shouldn’t write synopses, that profession is off my list.”

“No, I understand, that sounds wicked… You know, I should be letting you get on with your lonesome to keep up all what’s going to happen.” Gamzee nodded at her. “I’d stick around, but I don’t do good thinking I am motherfucking intruding all in your time of yourself.”

“Oh, are you sure?”

“Maybe we can chat again sometime. Another night. Then you could all up and tell me about growing up on an island mostly alone. It sounds a bunch like my wrigglerhood. I’d be interested to hear all your words at it.”

“I’d like that, if you don’t mind telling me about your younger days.”

“It’s a deal, brainysis.” Gamzee smiled.

“You get some sleep, just tell your mind to shut off and ignore your thoughts. Or envision something like an apple and focus on that. That’s what I do when I can’t sleep and it works everytime.”

“Look at you giving me all types of useful advice. Thanks for it, sis. You sleep yourself, and get it done all cozy and good.”

Gamzee stood slowly, leaving the room as Jade was picking back up her book. He smiled to himself, walking down the hall, making his way to the basement. Maybe he would try to steal a few hours of sleep.

He settled down on the plushie pile, trying not to wake Karkat, but the movement did knock him out of sleep. “Mff…” Karkat looked up, blinked blearily, and gaped. “Gamzee, what the hell happened? Drive-by grooming?”

“Part One was a motherfucking success,” Gamzee said, snapping his fingers proudly.

~~~

“Okay, so why did we need to gather in your room, specifically gathering minus trolls?” Jade asked, making herself comfortable on Rose’s folded-up blankets on the floor while the boys sat on the bed. It was noon, and the trolls had settled into a comfortable routine of sleeping through from a few hours after midnight till afternoon, giving them sufficient time to associate with the humans while not spending too much time in daylight; the humans would have another hour or two without them.

Rose sat in the computer chair, fingers steepled in front of her mouth. “Because I’m rather concerned about them. Specifically, about one of them. I know they’ve been nothing but helpful and pleasant, if in a rather bizarre way…” Nepeta had meant well, but the deer blood refused to come out of the carpet. “… But we must remember that they are, in fact, fugitives. And I’ve been questioning why.”

“Well, we know why! They ran away from their crazy evil empire!” John said.

“That may not be the only reason. I’m especially concerned about Mr Makara.” Rose consulted her
notebook. "On our first meeting I assumed the lines on his face were some form of natural pigmentation, then upon closer inspection I decided they may be some form of bodily modification. Being told they were not tattoos was not conclusive proof they were not; scarification is common in many cultures. However, from his reaction to John’s questioning, we can safely assume he did not choose to have those marks made."

"Dude, why does it matter if the guy’s a loser fighter?" Dave gestured. "I mean, come on, he looks like Inigo Montoya with those things. I guess ‘you killed my father’ doesn’t work for a troll, though… ‘You killed my seagoat’?"

"Dave, did you get a good look at his forearm? Those markings are definitely some form of script, not just random marks. I’m leaning towards script after seeing their writing a few times now, the marks do bear a heavy resemblance to writing."

"I don’t go round examining people’s forearms, cuz."

"Apart from that, look closely at his face. Those aren’t just lines, that’s a full Chelsea grin. It was cut right through into his mouth."

"Oh no!" Jade looked ill.

"Now, they have never mentioned gangs, or any other group that would do that to another being based on gang-like terms. So I suppose that is an option, a relatively small one but an option nonetheless. However, they have talked about their empire and they way they handle their laws…”

“Rose, are you saying that there is a chance that he’s not so stoned he’s duking it out with any type of garden tools, instead that’s a legal thing? Like an official punishment. Not he had a summer job mowing yards and him and the weedwacker had a disagreement?"

“I’m saying that I have my suspicions. Perhaps all of you will allow me an opportunity to explain my reasoning, and my ideas. Then we can open the floor to a type of debate.” Rose cleared her throat. "Firstly, Gamzee has always struck me as odd. He has a very short temper and if you watch all of them interact with him. All of their reactions and many of the things they say seemed to be based on his reactions. Also, all of them, except Karkat really, seem nervous to be around him. Primarily Eridan and Nepeta, which is odd considering they are in a relationship."

“Well, isn’t that relationship founded on hate?” Jade asked. “Sorry, but I want you to elaborate.”

“If it was just hate I don’t think there would be that much fear there. Both of them are obviously afraid of him. But even Tavros seems nervous around him. All of them do. But this isn’t just about him, his is just the most obvious. I’ll talk about the others later.” Rose paused for a moment gathering her thoughts.

“We do know he was on drugs,” John piped up. “I know Karkat said he needed them, but didn’t he say they were to keep him calm? And we saw him in that video when he was a kid, he was obviously pretty doped… Wow, how early did he start? I don’t know if drug use would be punishable by something that extreme, though, even if he was taking illegal stuff.”

“Their society is a bit extreme… If the drugs were medically necessary would he be punished for them?” Jade added. “I don’t think a doctor can prescribe you something that is illegal. I don’t even know if they have doctors on their planet…”

“I’m glad all of you are starting to notice what I did, just something about them seems a little weird, and them fleeing to bring about change with their princess seems a little odd. I’m not going to say it’s
a lie, but it seems a little ‘plotty’ if you understand what I mean.” Rose folded her hands on her lap, over her notebook. “When we were watch movies, he seems to be quieter than usual, especially when we watched Con Air. Most of the trolls managed to understand it so I don’t think it was an error in translation. Unless he happens to learn slower than his friends, which is an option, but beyond that he hasn’t shown any other inability in retaining information.”

“Uh,” John said, something suddenly occurring to him. “I saw the marks on his arm, and then when we saw that troll porn site I thought one of the page headings looked really familiar. And, um, you remember specifically which bit of Con Air made him go weird?”

His meaning dawned on the other three, and they looked nervously at each other.

“That…” Rose drew the word out long enough it could have been its own sentence, “had crossed my mind, yes. It certainly could be a reason for a medically necessary drug that saps fighting ability. Also something that could be severe enough to punish with those types of wounds.”

“Do they even punish for that though?” Dave asked. “They seem fine with all other types of violence.”

“Yes, but obviously they do have laws regarding sex and how it should be done. No doubt forcing yourself on someone would not make for a strong addition to the slurry.” Rose realized what she said, and the strangeness of it hit her full force. “Being a convict would give any person enough drive to run, get as far away as possible.”

“But what about his friends?” Jade said quickly. “Wouldn’t they not want to be around him?”

John’s face went a sickly green. “Depends on what they did.”

“Suddenly I’m very glad the big guy is busy pupating.”

“They had time when they were traveling to think up a story. They’ve been careful not to let much slip, but they can’t help their unconscious reactions,” Rose said looking down at her lap. “I don’t want to necessarily say that perhaps they are spoon-feeding us lies. But the whole thing seems like they are hiding something…”

“Some things,” Dave corrected. “They are a lot of fun, but really they could just be the welcome wagon for an invasion. Or a bunch of loony criminals. Then again they could be telling us the truth, and we’re misreading them because of culture.”

“I don’t think suspiciously looking at a member of your party before you say anything is normal behavior in any society,” Rose said quickly.

“Didn’t they say rape wasn’t illegal in troll-land, though?” Dave said. “I specifically remember we were all squicked out about that.”

“Except in the case of a lowerblood attacking a highblood,” Jade remembered. “Oh dear. That might explain why Eridan doesn’t like to be hugged.”

“He doesn’t? He’s okay with hugging me.”

“John, his thing for you is specifically supposed to exclude sex,” Jade said, worrying her lip with her teeth. “I was starting to think he had a crush on me, maybe he’s nervous because…”

“Have you seen how Gamzee gives Feferi weird looks sometimes?” Dave was running out of witty remarks for once.
“Okay, let’s all stop speculating,” Rose said, holding her hand up. “We’re jumping to conclusions here, and it’s highly likely we’re wrong. Though it’s also possible we’re not, so I think we should all be a little more careful.” She looked at Jade and John. “And be extra nice to Eridan. Maybe we can get more information out of him.”
“You guys have asked a lot of questions about Earth. Do you guys mind if we ask you some about your planet?” Jade asked, looking around the other inhabitants of the room. The trolls were all sitting in the living room which sort of became the default location for these little pow-wows of question and answering sessions; their training was over for the afternoon and they were taking a break to fix their weapons while Mom cooked dinner.

“I don’t see how that would be a problem,” Feferi said, crossing her ankles and looking over towards Jade. “We’ll do our best to answer them.”

“Well you asked about our government, and other governments in the world. Can we ask about yours? I mean you’re trying to overthrow it so I have to be curious.”

“It’s not so much as I am trying to overthrow it as I am trying to avoid being killed.” Feferi said. “I have a psychic connection with a lusus, the same one the Empress has. If we still have the shared connection at the time I become a true adult, she will unleash a song that will kill every troll below Tyrian. Traditionally, I would have met her at conscription. I ducked out of those rules to give myself another sweep to train so I would be better prepared to fight her. Overthrowing the government and changing it is sort of secondary. I have to live long enough to do it.”


“Do bees know they are bees? Yellow,” Dave quoted, causing the trolls to stare at him. “What, your planet missed out on the SCP Foundation too? Geez, I feel happier you landed here every day.”

“So what are your rulers actually like?” Jade asked. “If we might have to deal with them I’d like to know about them. Besides, you know, ‘evil’.”

“Um,” Feferi said slowly, looking at the other trolls. “The what? And I’ve never met the Empress, if I had I wouldn’t be standing here... I don’t know what she’s like. Unless you’re asking about how she rules, is that what you’re asking, or are you looking for... what’s the word-- tabloid fodder?”

“Never mind about the first one, it’s an internet thing,” Rose said. “And no, we know you haven’t actually met, but any information would be useful. Remember, we haven’t ever encountered your species before we met you. We’d like to know any way she’s different from a normal troll, anything which might help us to help you prepare to face her. For starters, do you have pictures? I’m curious
what she looks like.”

“I’m sorry, I’m apparently the worst at this English-Human thing. As for what she looks like... Sollux, do you have your computer handy?”

“When do I not? I would thay everyone gather around, but if you want to, come on.” Sollux grabbed his computer and opened it up. “It taketh a minute to boot, cuthtom thythtem. Pluth, I need to make thure the blockerth are on.”

“Right,” Feferi said. “Everyone shift, so the humans can see the pictures.”

Karkat looked around the trolls, looking slightly grim, but shifted so all of them could see Sollux’s computer and add their thoughts as necessary. All of them, towards the end of their wiggler sweeps, started to pay attention to all the news feeds. They got to know the trolls they were going against. No doubt they’d have thoughts to add. He reached over and squeezed Gamzee’s fingers lightly. The purpleblooded troll returned the gesture. He was okay, this would be okay, Karkat decided.

“No prethure Thollux, no prethure.” The yellowblooded troll muttered at his computer, clicking through a few things very fast; the humans didn’t have enough time to fully see or begin to understand what he was doing before he moved on to the next task.

“We can discuss our enemies,” Kanaya said. “Who they are, what we know, and what they do, and who we think will come?” The room fell silent, unwilling to say the words but all knowing.

“Probably the higher ups,” Nepeta said cautiously. “They said our group is a lot bigger and more organized than we really are. So for press alone, they’ll be here. Plus, any other... ulterior motives.”

“Let’s just start wwith the Empress, and go from there. I don’t think they need to knoww all the head general’s faces.”

“They only really need to have knowing about two of them,” Gamzee said.

“Okay,” Kanaya said softly. “We can go through the uppercrust, the main part of the council and Empress, plus one other. Obviously going into the whole council would take a bit of time, just those that have the main jobs. Unless the humans want to know more.” She turned towards Gamzee and as low as possible she whispered in Alternian. “Are you sure?” He just nodded at her.
“Okay, here we go...” Sollux opened up the first of the official pictures. The humans squinted at it.

“Is there something wrong with that picture? It’s awfully dark.”

“That’s how our official photos traditionally look. I’m guessing they look a lot clearer to us than to you,” Karkat explained. “Night vision.” Sollux adjusted the screen brightness a little so the human audience could get a better view.

“That better, humanth?” Sollux asked tilting his monitor so they could hopefully see it better. “That’s the max brightness on my screen, without editing I can’t do much better.”

“Who is this?”

“Orwurm Satsan,” Vriska said. “She’s the council liaison with propaganda production. She’s in charge of making sure Alternia and its Empire are well informed, but only as the Empress wants them informed.”

“I see, are all your official pictures this dramatic?” The trolls nodded, and Rose tapped her pencil. “Also, to become part of this council, what color do you have to be?”

“We don’t see them as dramatic so much as regal.” Aradia added. “This type of production shows that they have a good standing in the Empire. It’s funny, if you go up the ranks, slowly the images get better and better. As for your second question, blue and above. Though, to be a blue or indigo blood on the council requires a lot of deft skill in your field.”

“So it’s usually only seadwellers then?”

“Usually, a few landtrolls can work their way up there, but they have to be fairly ruthless or know a lot of seadwellers. Which I think is Satsan’s story. Grew up around seadwellers, made a friend or two or killed a troll or two, was ruthless in battle then got promoted up the ranks,” Vriska said. “I’m not too sure though, never spent the time to research each of them.”

“I see, you can move on to the next one,” Rose said with a little nod.
“Thith is Kellis Thekret, she’s the financeth troll. Countth money, maketh thure that the higherbloodth get what they deserve and the lowerbloodth thtay impoverithhed.”

“No relation, as far as I know,” Vriska said. “Some of our signs, our sigils, are close to each other, but this asshat is a seatroll and would probably gut me for having a name close to hers.” Sollux took the human’s silent nodding as the hint to click to the next image, and Vriska continued. “Shruki Chooka is the advisor on galactic affairs. She doesn’t divide the land or the colonies, that’s another troll. But she basically is in charge of scouting out new planets, and making sure it’s of value to the Empire. You can thank her for thinking your planet was useless”

“Shront Pocott is the one who divides up colonies and keeps them maintained,” Karkat said. “They work hand in hand. Pocott and Chooka I mean, all of them do I’m sure.”

“I am noticing a trend of nothing but females in these roles, which, while a breath of fresh air, is a little odd from a human standpoint.”

“Not odd to us,” Terezi said. “There’s only one... I guess two men with any type of power. Both connected to something similar. Rarely do we want men in power. This is,” she said as Sollux clicked over to the next picture, “Shiera Zivern, chief legislacerator; she helps in the making of laws and making sure they are carried out.”

Sollux waited a moment before clicking to the next one. “Paoren Thriut,” Eridan said. “She looks ower all the branches of military and the final say in the division of labor among trolls.”

“Erhard Seiros, he's an officer in the church and The Empress' go-to when it comes to Alternian or inner-department security,” Gamzee said, looking at the troll on the screen but only briefly. “That’s what the church does for the Empire, they act as a very, uh, motherfucking terrible police force.”

Sollux hesitated, his mouse over another link. He took a breath and clicked it. The humans didn’t notice the trolls in the room tensing, or Karkat squeezing onto Gamzee’s hand like he was afraid he’d fly away. The room was silent, and the humans were left looking at a massive troll in facepaint, seated upon a throne. The silence seemed to stretch on forever, before Gamzee let out a little sigh and gritted his teeth.

"He’s connected to the other one,” Gamzee said, his voice hoarse. “That's the Grand Highblood; High General of the Imperial Army, The High Priest of The Most Mirthful of Churches, The Leader of the Subjugglators, Her Imperious Condescension's adviser and peacekeeper. And most
importantly an asshole of an ancestor.” The trolls looked at him, and Karkat squeezed Gamzee’s hand so tight he was sure if he wasn’t a highblood it would have broken. The humans looked over the image for another long moment. Just as Rose was about to ask a question, Dave butted in.

“You remind me of the babe,” he said, his voice steady

“What babe?” Jade called back.

“Babe of the power,” Dave carried on.

“What power?”

“The power of voodoo.”

“Who do?” John couldn’t contain himself at Jade’s callback, and started sniggering uncontrollably. Rose gave a little sigh, but it was apparent she was amused. She couldn’t hide her smile.

“You do.”

“Do what?”

“Remind me of the babe.” Dave smiled at Jade as all the humans descended into giggles. The trolls looked at them, semi-horrified, and mostly confused.

“Brava,” Rose said. “For the record, that was another one of those pop culture references that would take too long to explain, and we might as well show you the movie.”

“Ah,” Terezi said, nodding. “It’s sort of horrifying you’d say some of those words in conjunction with… the general. For cultural reasons I won’t go into, because they’d take too long to explain.”

“As I was about to say, before the sudden song break.” Rose cleared her throat. “What is an ancestor? I understand our meaning of the word, but in accordance with your cultural tradition.” Rose almost missed the terrible tense mood that had descended upon the trolls, but she could see
them fidget, and the emotions were not lost. She watched as all of the trolls looked over to Gamzee. With a little sigh, he nodded.

“That motherfucker’s a Makara, just like me. We share a sign and a blood color. He’s my ancestor. But it ain’t no matter,” Gamzee added the last bit more quietly, trying to shake the atmosphere of the room. “He’s a bastard either way.” The room was silent again, the humans rolling over the knowledge and the trolls prepping themselves for round two. Sollux swallowed as quietly as he possibly could before he clicked the link. There were few photos of the Empress, but each one was striking, with her 2x3dent and her malicious smile. The humans looked over the picture, while the trolls all stayed silent.

“ Seriously?” Gamzee asked no one in particular. “This is the Imperious motherfucking Condescension, Empress of Alternia, Supreme Autocrat of the Alternian Empire, Conductor of the Vast Glub, and another asshole of an ancestor. Feferi’s ancestor... to be all exact on blood color.”

“Can you go back, or like put them side by side? The last two, just humor me.” Sollux shifted; it looked like he was getting comfortable. Unseen by the humans, he took the moment to slide his eyes over to Gamzee, who just looked dead in the face. He took that as an okay, that Gamzee wasn’t really paying attention anymore. He clicked the links and opened the photos side by side.

Rose shook her head. “I’m sorry, I understand he must be an impressive figure in real life, but when I look at the picture of your general, all I can see is a clown. An unnerving one, definitely, but still.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s kind of the thing with the Church of the Mirthful Messiahs,” Gamzee said.

“Clowns are a thing? In a church?”

“Yeah, it’s the paint. They- we... They paint their faces in patterns that bring the spirits joy. There’s a lot of other shit that’s motherfucking involved but the paint’s intentional. Sort of gotta be dressed for the Carnival at all times, since... Les Gadari waits for no troll.”

“Wait, he actually is meant to look like a clown? That’s not just some kind of cultural difference where it means something else to you?” Rose asked hesitantly, tilting her head.

Karkat nodded, then stared as the humans collapsed laughing. “What? What’s funny?”
“Dude!” Dave choked. “Your government is run by an actual clown. A clown with a fucking Sideshow Bob haircut. Tell me what about this is not funny?”

“Umm-”

“Gam, shoosh. They don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

“Never you fucking mind.”

“Fine, be all weird and cagey.” Dave looked back at the pictures of the troll rulers and burst into snickers again.

Jade controlled her giggles enough to say “Wow, you say trolls rank by blood colour, are you sure giant hairdos don’t factor in as well? I mean, come on, look at them.”

“Yeah, seriously, how do you even get a ‘fro that’s that big? Hump a plug socket?”

“You know who’d really impress ‘em?” John chuckled. “Cousin Itt. Just show them a few Addams Family movies and the war’s over. ‘Yeah, we concede to your giant hairball’.” He shook his head. “Geez, and I thought having a dad who collects creepy clown-themed shit was bad enough, never mind one who is a creepy clown.”

Gamzee made a noise that was masked with a cough. But the lack of sudden freak outs and bloodshed helped the other trolls relax enough to speak. Feferi cleared her throat, intent on helping the humans understand Alternian tradition. “About the Empress,” she said, “we don’t cut our hair, from the time we’re grubs. Sort of a ‘we look like our lusus’ thing. I can’t really give you an excuse for the general.”

“Also, with the Empress and Fef, it looks really impressive underwater.”

“I’m not too sure if I should be scared or wait for him to bring out the seltzer and pies. Or is he one of those clowns that’s like really serious?”
“Um.” The trolls floundered for a response.

“He tries to be funny but fails at it miserably,” Gamzee said softly. “Least, I never found him funny.”

Jade’s laughter trailed off and she hugged herself. “Is it just me or is it suddenly kind of cold in here?... Aradia, are you looking at something?”

“Yes, but do not mind it.” She said a small smile on her lips. “Just looking at the wall.”

Gamzee turned his head to her, then around the room quickly. It seemed like some type of private conversation. The humans mostly ignored it, but Rose made a little mental note before looking back down at the computer. Dave looked at the picture of the Condesce again. “Wow, Fef. Your mom’s hot.”

Feferi glubbed indignantly. “She’s not my ‘mom’! My mom is under the Alternian seas, probably nearly starving. Unless some other seadwellers took up the task. I’m sure they would, the Glub would kill them too. That woman is unfortunately related to me, but not my mom in any way shape or form. She’s an evil, terrible, and cruel bitch. Pardon my language, but the day I put my trident through her is going to be one of the best days of my life.”

Sollux reached over and patted Feferi’s arm. “Hey, FF, it’th okay. Humanth are just uthing termth they underthtand, don’t get too angry about it okay?” He patted her arm gently. “It’th alright.”

“Whatever.” Dave looked back at the screen. “She’s still hot, in the, you know, evil kind of way.”

“Uh, guys?” Gamzee pointed to the scars on his face. “See these? They caused that.”

There was a dead silence.

“... Well, there goes my chance of ever being able to have sex with anyone ever again,” Dave muttered, looking at his groin. “Facial mutilation is kind of a bonerdeath.”
“Seriously? You’re not just messing with us?” John asked. Gamzee shook his head, and John waited for more than just a physical reaction. Instead all he had was a shake of the head. “Well, that is a little more frightening.”

“The Empress has enslaved thousands of planets, she has signed death warrants for other species, and trolls without any evidence or care. She is evil incarnate. And her pet-general isn’t much better. See all those colors in the background?” Feferi said, pointing at the Highblood’s image. “That’s troll blood, every one of those stains is another troll. See that green?” Feferi pointed. “That’s an entire bloodcaste slaughtered for no good reason, just removed from Alternia. I’m sure they have some backwards reason, maybe they were too nice, but they killed all of those trolls. And I’m positive there are more that you can’t see the blood of. At least not in any obvious place.”

The humans heard a hiss from Gamzee and one from Aradia. They didn’t ask for a translation, instead they were staring at the image Feferi was pointing at. Jade shivered, unsure if it was from the cold of the room or her own disgust.

“Is that... really all blood?” she asked, hoping that maybe Feferi just said it to be dramatic.

Feferi looked grim and nodded. “Some of it may be something worse,” Gamzee said darkly, and Karkat shooshed him.

“All of that is blood. He’s known for a quickly changing temper, he can be in a great mood then kill you for no good reason. The Empress isn’t any better, she allows the church to do whatever as long as she has enough trolls to still rule. And trust me, she does. What are a few that are slaughtered for entertainment? What does it matter if they are another species living a peaceful life on another planet? They’re not trolls and deserve to be enslaved.”

John’s face was a sickly grey. “Okay, you’ve successfully managed to make me terrified of a guy who wears his underpants on the outside. Impressive.”

“Hey!” Gamzee sounded offended, but not especially angry. “I said he’s an asshole, but lay off the codpiece, okay? It’s motherfucking tradition.”

The humans looked at him for a moment as if he’d grown another head. Rose shook her head. “A codpiece? I wouldn’t assume trolls would have a need for them, since their... genitalia are internal.”

“For thousands of sweeps our planet’s hoofed mammals were revered as symbols of strength, and
“So, what, horsetroll wasn’t making up some lame excuse for all that furry porn?” Nepeta pursed her lips, and shook her head.

“I’m not going to get into a discussion about religion with you. Just know it’s tradition and lay off it. Make fun of either of them all you want, but not that.”

“The fishwoman and clown that rule an Empire,” Dave said. “No offense, Feferi or Eridan, but I have now seen it all. I don’t think anyone could come up with something this strange. Not without them just accepting its absurdity for what it is. All of this with a traditional codpiece. I think I have hit my limit.”

“But,” Jade said, looking at the screen, “this is what’s coming after you, right? I think we could take them down. I mean, even if I had to get an RPG or something a bit bigger. It shouldn’t be too hard... I mean it would be hard, but not impossible.”

“They’re coming with the fleet. The fleet that specializes in taking over planets and conquering. They wouldn’t come alone.”

“Will they just blow up our planet?”

“Tradition states that she has to fight me in front of an audience. Not that she’s obeyed that before, but we’re trying to use it in our favor. With a crowd she has to abide by the law. Instead of doing other things, like allowing more trolls into the fight.”

“I still think a few semi-automatics would help, M-16s and a few RPGs might be good to get.”

“And how precisely are you going to explain to Grandpa Harley why we need these things?”

“Hey, look on the bright side, Rose - at least he has them to send.”

“Indeed, but how does that sound? ‘Pardon me, Grandpa, but I require some M-16’s and rocket
launchers.’ ‘Why?’ ‘No good reason, I just need them.’”

“Maybe we could tell him the truth? You’ve met Grandpa, he’d probably believe us. I’m kind of surprised he wasn’t on Doomsday Preppers; remember when I turned thirteen and he told me all about how the world was going to end soon and I needed to be prepared for the biggest adventure of my life? Then he never mentioned it again, I guess he was a few years off.”

“There’s a risk - we wouldn’t be able to prove anything over the phone, and I’m not sure a webcam would be secure enough, I don’t know if the internet service provider would keep the recording or something. I’d suggest transportalising over in person, but Mom hasn’t got those working right yet, she’s been tied up with the trolls... I’d trust them to send guns over, but not living people.”

“Hey, did Equius do all that work on your car for nothing?”

“People would notice a normal car travelling at the speed of sound, Karkat.”

“And even if that wasn’t obvious, I don’t think the car can make it across the ocean. So we’d drown if we tried.”

“There has to be a way, though!” John said. “I’d feel better with some military grade equipment. Then again I guess if aliens show up the military will start readying themselves.”

“It wouldn’t be wise for humans to try to fight the Empire,” Feferi said. “At least not obviously, you mount your armies and charge... The ground will be painted red. It would be better to let us try to stop them.”


“Well, yes, but if I can take down the Empress then I can order them to stop their attack. Even if they were deathly loyal to her they’d have to obey the change of power. Or those that switch over will attack them and kill them. It’s not wise at the point to keep fighting. That’s when the assassination attempts and the rebel groups form. It would be safer for the humans to stay back, and if we end up dying... The Empress might just see humans as unfortunate, even if they do conquer the planet they’d be nicer than if you tried to fight.”

“‘Nicer’ meaning what?”
“Meaning they’d probably either take you as slaves or kill you right off, not make a game of it.”

“Probably slaves,” Eridan said after a moment of thinking over it. “Seeing as you can deal with the sun, they tend to take those ones as slaves. I don’t know what your planet has for them, but probably slaves”

“That’s calming,” Rose said rolling her eyes. “If anything that information makes me want to fight against them more. Humans tend to shy away from being enslaved.”

“Better to be enslaved–” Terezi cut off her sentence with a hiss from Gamzee. “It would be better to be a slave then let them toy with you until they decided you’re a new delicacy.”

John shivered, and he and Rose briefly locked eyes in worry.

~~~~

“So, the heads of government are responsible for Gamzee’s scars.” Rose tapped her fingers together. “Did he mean directly or indirectly? If the latter, that’s another mark on our tally against him; we do know troll law is brutal, and perhaps they were responsible for bringing into effect the law that led to his punishment.”

“I don’t think he would mean they did it personally,” Jade said nervously. “Didn’t they say trolls don’t usually ever meet their parents? I don’t know if he’d be special even if his dad is so important. If they live so long and need buckets to hold all their stuff they must each have thousands of babies, I don’t know if he’d be the first Makara to survive… I don’t know, I guess it is possible they met, but if they did why wouldn’t he say so?”

“Trolls are weird, whaddya gonna do,” Dave said.

“Uh, also, I feel bad for eavesdropping, but Kanaya was talking to Gamzee and Karkat, and I picked up a couple of words Eridan and Tavros taught me,” Jade said nervously. “Something about they did well, and she was sorry, and something about Gamzee and danger. Then they all smiled and shook hands, but she looked a bit nervous with Gamzee.”
“Proof! That’s the sticky point, we need proof before we can confront them!” Rose shook her head and clicked her tongue, and said slowly “I think I know how we can confirm it one way or another. We need to find out what that word on his arm means! And I think I have an idea as to how...”

“Maybe, y’know, ask them?”

“We can’t do that, John, they’ll know we’re onto them! No, we need Dave, a pencil and sketchpad, and a troll’s computer.”
“Strider, I told you, I ain’t comfortable with you drawing me.”

Dave ignored Gamzee and squinted closer at his arm, mentally thanking PlushRumps for bringing in enough that he could get such excellent prescription shades. The sketch of Gamzee had taken shape and now Dave was filling in details. Gamzee’s sleeves were rolled up again; he was cooking again, and he must have figured everyone had already seen his scars. Both the sketched and the living Gamzees wore an expression of irritation.

“Come on! It’s harmless.”

“I don’t like it, and I’m asking you to stop.” Gamzee punctuated his words with the tink sound of the knife hitting the chopping board. Dave was impressed. Not many people could slice carrots as menacingly as Gamzee managed it.

“It’s just a drawing, sheesh. You make it sound like this is going to steal your soul or light you on fire. It will do neither, though if I had drawing powers that could light someone on fire that would be wickedly awesome. Then I—”

“I said stop.” Gamzee put down the knife, reached over, and grabbed onto the pencil in Dave’s hand. “So, you’re gonna stop.”

Thanks to his glasses, Dave was able to look closely at Gamzee’s arm while pretending to look him in the eye as he was marched backwards out of the kitchen. Gamzee’s teeth were bared, and the grip on Dave’s arm was tight enough that it was starting to get painful. He trusted that the troll wouldn’t get too violent with him. There would be hell to pay if he did, so he could keep his mind off the throbbing his arm was doing to study the lines.

“What? Come on, if you’re worried about your ugly face it’s only mirrors that shatter from that, not pencils—”

Gamzee’s fist knocked off Dave’s glasses and sent Dave backwards onto the couch. Gamzee loomed over him, scowling, and sighed exasperatedly.

“In your own words, Strider; I warned you about stares.”
Dave smirked inwardly. He’d got the details he needed.

~~~

“Okay, you’re sure this is what his arm marking says?”

“Photographic memory, Lalonde.” Dave traced the script with his finger. “Took a few tries to see it all, but this is it.”

“And I got Nepeta’s computer!” Jade said, holding up the tablet and stylus proudly. “She said she was okay with us using it to check out troll culture. She did ask if we just wanted it to look at porn.” Jade blushed. “Well, technically we do, so I felt bad about lying, but she said she didn’t mind that. She says even if Sollux is her kismewhatever she trusts his virus protection stuff.”

John shook his head. “I can’t believe this is our grand plan to figure this out. Look at a word carved into someone and do a websearch on it. In a language we can’t read or understand. I can only hope we find the right website, and we can figure out how to clear our search history. No doubt that wouldn’t go over well."

“Nepeta doesn’t strike me as the really computer-savvy type. I’m pretty sure we can figure out how to clear it. Or at least remove enough that she doesn’t know what we looked at.”

“John, are you sure it looked familiar?”

“About seventy-eighty percent sure, I mean their script is different and I could have mussed it up. Like I wanted to see something familiar and I did, but it does look familiar. Before Dave I got the closest look at the thing on his arm.”

“Well, we can look and if nothing comes up we’ll have to come up with something better.” Jade clicked the icon she thought Nepeta had used to open the internet, and realised it wasn’t when a large picture file came up. “Oops, wrong button… wait, are these pictures of us?”

“Looks like it.” Dave said, looking over the image. “And those would be pictures of the trolls… and… Holy skating taco surprise, it’s a chart about us dating.”
“Are you serious?” Rose said, leaning forward. “Well, it is. How weird.”

“Nepeta has a shipping chart?” Jade asked looking over it again; she couldn’t read the words but she could tell by the graphics and colors just what was going on.

John looked at the column marked with a crude stick-figure drawing of Rose, and scanned down it, noting the number of spade symbols. “Uh, wow, Rose, it looks like a lot of the trolls want you to hate them. Should I congratulate you?”

Rose looked from her column and row to Kanaya’s, and smiled when she saw only red and pink in the intersecting squares.

“So, what, I guess the circled ones are official?” Dave wondered. “See, she’s circled the diamond for her and horsetroll and the clubs for her and the purple ones.”

“What do the boxes around them mean?” Jade asked. “Is that like what she wants?”

“I’m not too sure,” Rose said her fingers tracing along a column. “Vriska and Eridan have a black square, so do Sollux and him. Hmm. No, it looks like what has been, I notice she has her and Karkat’s outlined in red. I think it means it’s happened and ended. I think the size of the symbols is her indication of what she thinks would work.”

“Why are some of Tavros and Eridan’s columns greyed out?” John asked. “Does she refuse to ship them like that?”

“Perhaps, or maybe it means she doesn’t think there are any good matches here.” All of them looked over the chart. “That is a lot of trolls vying for my black quadrant… Apparently I’m the only one who isn’t greyed out on that one. The rest of you are. “Rose sighed, her fingers hovering over a mark on the chart.

“Well, she’s a bit late on some of them, we’ve already dated,” Dave said, looking at Jade. “So have you and Rose.”

“I notice she’s got diamonds in all our shared squares as well. What’s that little mark on top of them,
Jade looked at the square Eridan and Feferi shared, which had all four symbols and the extra mark in. “I’d guess it’s the troll equivalent of a question mark. Huh, she’s got you and me as hearts, John. Think we should explain the concept of an incest taboo?”

“I’m kind of freaked out by how little you reacted to that,” John said dubiously, scowling at the diamond marking himself and Eridan. “I’d be a lot happier with Eridan’s thing if he wasn’t so pushy, now Nepeta’s in on it too? Sheesh.”

“Need I remind you both of their concept of reproduction does involve the very lovingly-named ‘Incestous Slurry’? I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t quite understand it. However, it might benefit us to explain that usually related pairs don’t procreate. It might avoid an uncomfortable discussion later.” Rose was still looking over the chart. “Oh, look, Dave. She likes you a little.”

“Okay, this is all fun, but it’s not really helping us tell if we have a psychopath under our roof,” Dave pointed out amid John and Jade’s snickers. “Shall we go see if we can find the right icon this time?”

Jade, still giggling, managed to find it. The browser was set up similarly to an Earth one, and luckily Nepeta hadn’t cleared her browser history since looking at the porn site on which they had seen the infamous moirallegiance video, so they were able to find it after a couple of false starts and pauses to examine websites full of pictures of Alternian creatures which looked like double-mouthed kittens.

“Aliens are all very weird,” John said as the page was loading. “I guess we’re not much better as we try to covertly find out if one of them is a psychopath… through a porn site. I sometimes realize how ridiculous this summer is, and the gravity of it hits me and I’m forced to think about my entire life and all my decisions that have led me to this point.”

“This does sound like some sorry B-grade movie. Actually I don’t even know if it’s B-grade. It might be F or G grade. Then again, I’m in it, so it’s probably at least C-grade.”

“At least we can figure this out. Hopefully.” Jade looked down at the computer. “Geez, maybe we should have asked a troll whose computer has a keyboard instead of a pen. I could have thought that through better.”

“Doesn’t the site have a search page? You can just write the word in.”
“How would we know if it did? I don’t know how to spell ‘search’ in Alternian. We might have to… well, look around.”

“Jade,” Dave said, grabbing her shoulder. “Are you telling me we might have to look at more alien porn?”

“Yes, I-”

“Is that really what you’re telling me?” Dave seemed horribly serious, still holding on to her.

“Yes, Dave. I-”

“Jade, no, is that your final answer, that we have to look at strange alien porn that we can’t understand, all for the sake of finding this mysterious word?”

“Yes, Dave, it’s my final answer, and I-”

“Okay then, let’s do this,” Dave said, sitting back, all the seriousness gone. He took in all of their expressions, and gave a little smirk. “It’s a learning experience.”

“Okay…” Jade scrolled around. “I don’t see it here, it’ll probably be in one of the sections… Here we go.” She clicked the first link, and started to examine the text. The rest of the humans were too busy looking at the thumbnails; all of them were strange, and they wondered what their porn would look like in comparison. From a human point of view what they could see was more funny than arousing. The thumbnails varied, showing different trolls doing different things, but it wasn’t hard to see this was a category list. Jade sighed.

“John, are you sure you saw it here or was it on a related video?” Jade shook her head. “I can’t believe I just asked my cousin that.”

“I was sure I saw it somewhere on here, it all was clicked on so fast.”

“Just click a video, and let’s see if the word pops up,” Dave said. Rose stared at him.
“Do you know how long it might take for us to happen across a video with this word in the title?”

“On the bright side,” Dave said, pointing at the videos under the category Jade clicked on, “I think all of them are labeled by kink. That’s the word we clicked on and it’s in some weird brackety-things on each video. I think the videos have to be labeled by kink, Empire law or something, not one of them is missing it.”

“That would be a lot more helpful if we could read them.” Jade squinted. “I think that squarish thing’s their equivalent of an E - Eridan was teaching me how to write the troll’s names,” she explained in reply to the other’s curious expressions. “But since we don’t know what the words mean, that’s no help.”

“Great, so we could accidentally run across the actual Troll 2 Girls 1 Cup and not know till too late,” John groaned.

“If we find anything really disgusting I’ll click Back really fast, at least we found that button,” Jade promised. “Okay, here goes.” She opened the first video, and it began.

“Okay, this one seems pretty bland,” John said, tilting his head. “The bucket thing is really weird. And the yellow trolls are kind of creeping me out, I can’t shake the feeling that we’re watching them pee.”

“There’s a market for that.”

“Eww, Dave!”

“The red ones are worse.”

“Dave!”

Jade clicked through to another one, and they watched for a few minutes, trying to make any sense of it, and looking over all the words presented on the page to see if one of them matched their word.
“Is it just me or does this look like the typical pizza delivery guy plot?” John asked suddenly. “Like this troll just came to this other troll with something in his hands, then he was invited inside and now it’s starting to get weird. I seriously think this is cheesy delivery porn. Oh god.”

“Nice to know some concepts are universal,” said Rose, smirking. “Wait, is that Sauron?”

“I think that’s an Imperial Drone. Or a troll in a cardboard drone costume, anyway.” Dave peered closer. “Wow, that thing’s freaky enough to defeat its own purpose.”

“Are we…” Jade squinted at the words on the screen, as if she could stare at them long enough to make them make sense, “in the Fuck or Die kink area? Or is this normal?”

“I think it’s actually normal, but in porn it’s a kink,” Dave said. “I talked to Rezi about this a little bit. Imperial Drones are completely normal, but I don’t think many trolls would want to be reminded of it when they watch porn, since it could result in death. Especially if you’re watching a lot of porn. I mean a constant reminder you’re going to die is going to be like salt on a slug. So this must be a kink thing.”

“Wonderful.”

“I think the costuming is brilliant,” John said, nudging Jade’s hands out of the way of the computer and taking hold of the trackpad. “Look at the wonderful Drone costume from this angle.” He went back and paused the movie. They looked at the screen, for a moment before John spoke in a strange low voice, his finger following the line of the fake Drone suit. “‘I’m sorry, I would collect your genetic material but it appears a troll is busting out of my back.’”

“Seriously, they couldn’t even put a back on the the thing?” Dave asked to no one in particular, as Jade burst into snickers. “This must be B-grade or amateur, that kind of production value is really terrible. At least if we do end up making peaceful contact Bro won’t have any competitors in his league on the new planet.”

“Moving on,” Rose said firmly, pushing John’s hand out of the way and clicking on another video. They let it play for a moment, trying to look for the word in the text beneath it, before their thoughts were interrupted by John laughing.

“Oh my god, is that guy supposed to be playing a seadweller?” He pointed to the troll on the screen, who was draped in gaudy jewels - probably glass ones - and little else. “He looks like he stuck a pair
of rubber gloves on his face!"

“Going by what I know of their caste system, I’d guess it’s illegal to imitate nobility,” Rose said, smirking again. “At least, to do so convincingly. Look closely, his eyes are green too. How are they going to fake the colour of his- ah,” she trailed off as the camera panned away from the bucket at the last second, and a poorly-done cut scene showed a bucket filled with what looked like purple ink.

Dave responded to the whole scene with the start of a slow clap. “That was perfect, I thought human porn could be bad, this is amazing. I almost want to share it with the entire world. It’s just so terrible it’s the most beautiful thing I ever saw.”

“Okay, let’s move to the next one,” Jade said hurriedly, clicking one of the “related videos” or whatever was under the current video. They clicked through a few more, becoming progressively more puzzled. Whatever trolls thought was music was worse than nails on a chalkboard, mixed with high-pitched wailing, and the videos had way too much of it to be comfortable to sit through for too long.

“I’m starting to wonder if we should look for another categories page or something,” Jade said with a sigh.

“‘Why pretty lady,’” John said in a terrible fake voice that made him sound greasy. “‘Don’t you want to see my fighting skills?’” John paused briefly. “‘Oh yes!’” he continued in a higher voice. “‘I’ve never seen someone use what looks like a hook on a stick so well before. Your fighting skills impress me enough I should just rip off all my clothes…’ ‘Don’t bother, I want to show you my stickhook up close as I grab your shoulder. I might be threatening you but you seem on the verge of laughter…’ ‘Oh I’m not laughing, I’m really shocked you’d show me your stickhook up close. Please let me tear off my clothes to let me get it closer…’ ‘No need, I will tear them off for you. Though these seams were obviously breakaway seams, and I don’t think it’s wise to be wearing clothes like that in public…’ ‘Oh no, you’ve found out about my easy to rip clothes. Please stop chastising me while shaking them at my face…’”

“Oh god, John. Stop. Just stop.”

“No, seriously, I have no idea what’s going on, so I’m trying to figure it out. I’m offering all of you a storyline to go with it.”

“I don’t think that is what’s happening in this particular movie.”
“So? I like mine better.”

“I’m going to the next one before he starts overdubbing the actual sex parts.”

“Don’t give them ideas, Jade.”

“Too late.” Dave and John high-fived, and Rose shook her head. Jade clicked over to another video, looking over the text once again; she saw nothing of interest, though she did have to read it several times to be sure she’d got it all, distracted by the boys’ attempts to dub it.

“‘Where are your pants?’”

“‘I took them off because I was banging your mom for a minute there. And now… I’m banging you’? Stupid trolls ruining my reference. Why’d the girl even walk in if she’s not doing anything?’”

"I think that’s the brown one’s moirail. Apparently it's not so taboo for them to watch."

“Didn’t they say something about moirails can help trolls through difficult things? Maybe this is one of those things,” Jade said slowly. “Though her standing back there and just watching gives this a really stalkerish vibe.”

“It does, doesn’t it? It’s like she’s standing back there saying ‘Hey, cool, live action porn. With my stalker-crush… Keep going. Don’t mind me.’”

“Yeah, I think I’d want moral support if I was supposed to stick something that size in there.” John winced. “Ow.”

“I hope they are more stretchy than us, because if not the dub for everyone of these needs to be ‘ow, ow, ow, oh shit, ow, stop, seriously, ow, what the fuck are you trying to do? Saw me in half with your trouser slug?’”

Rose shook her head. “Okay, okay, this isn’t it, next.” Jade nodded, clicking on to the next video. There was a pause.
“Did we just stare at a door-frame-slash-entry way for nearly five seconds, without any actors or soundtrack?”

“That should probably have been removed. Where is my porn?! Goddamn it! If it’s just that strange door frame for a whole video… Aha.” Finally something actually happened onscreen, and Dave paused long enough to take in the scene. “So this is my house…” Dave used a low voice. “I want you to make yourself at home while I throw my jacket off camera.”

“Nice house, I think. I’m just gonna stand here awkwardly as we have a conversation without looking at each other.” John raised his voice, so he could act as the other troll in the scene, who could have been either male or female going by the clothes they were wearing.

“Look at my only piece of furniture, an entirely impractical chair.”

“I’ll just sit here then. I guess.”

“Okay, see you later.” Dave shook his head. “Seriously, did he just walk off and we’re left looking at a troll sitting in a chair?”


“This is terrible.” Jade buried her head in her hands. “I don’t even know if standing someone up is a fetish but it seems like it.”

“No, no, I’m back. Not with drinks or snacks or anything. I just sort of pop back in and resume having a conversation like I never left. Let me just step over you and the impractical chair. Whoops, almost crushed you. I’m not even sorry I could have just crushed you.”

“That’s alright, almost being fell on makes me need to stand up and get naked.”

“I’ll be back here, watching your strip tease from behind, though I can’t see anything. I’m glad the camera can, though. I didn’t even realize that was there. I’m glad they are enjoying the strip tease I can’t see.”
“I’m done,” Jade said clicking another link. “I am so done.”

“‘Hey, it’s my new facial,’” said Dave in a falsetto, taking in the video. “‘It’s made with real grass mollusk. Let me just wipe it all over my face to show you how well it works.’”

“‘Oh, I missed a spot. Let me just get that. Perfect, now my whole face is covered.’”

“‘It can also be used to clean your teeth. It’s the amazing grass mollusk! It even double as shampoo.’” Dave paused, long enough to let out a breathy “wow”.

“‘Don’t forget to try the amber conditioner. Also works great on horns.’”

“‘Single use devices? Not in troll-land. Our cleaners are multipurpose.’”

“‘And multisurface.’”

“‘For six easy payments of nine-ninety-nine you too can look like you tried to camouflage yourself. And did it poorly!’”

“‘Don’t delay, order today. If you call in the next fifteen minutes, we’ll send you the extra-charged grass mollusk. Good for claws and doubles as a hand lotion. Absolutely free! That’s right, free.’”

“‘If you use the codeword, ‘WTF, mate’, we’ll send you the beige slug full-body wash, backed by a one hundred percent satisfaction guarantee. It will make your skin softer than your couch pillows, or your money back. There’s no risk, order today!’”

“Cute, guys, really cute… Hey, wait,” Jade said as the next page was loading. She pointed at one of the icons, which was scrolling through a few still scenes for the video it offered. “That photo’s a bit blurry, but I could have sworn that looks like Eridan.”

“It’s probably another troll with gloves on his face and ink in a bucket.”
“Yeah, you’re probably right. I can’t really see Eridan being in porn.” The next page loaded and even through the laughter and the injection of humor they still looked over the screen for their mystery word.

“For the record,” Dave said, “it doesn’t make any sense to humans as being gross, but I think ‘ink in a bucket’ is something I’m going to have to use against the trolls. Probably while referencing squids or octopus… Just sayin’.”

“You shouldn’t be so mean to them, or they’ll bring you home a ton of dead animals and make you make paint,” Rose said. “Or show you their less culturally sensitive side.”

“I don’t think the trolls have much that would shock me. Culture-wise, they’re too regulated and tame. Other than killing being a fun pastime, they haven’t got much.” Dave looked at the video. “Speaking of which, does it look to anyone else like they’re giving birth to a squid when their things-”

“Okay, guys, I think that’s enough,” Jade interrupted. “What’s even happening in this- hey, look, they got a real seadweller for that one!… And a lot of other trolls too. Wow, that’s… that’s a lot of… stuff. Ew, what are they trying to do, drown that poor troll?” The video ended and she hastily clicked into the next category.

Dave snickered. “I’m never gonna be able to eat Skittles again without laughing… Aha!” Dave’s finger shot out and rested below the line on which the word they had been seeking was displayed. “I told you!”

Jade held up the paper on which the word was written and compared it to the screen. “Hey, it is! Good memories, boys. Okay, I think that one at the beginning is an A… no, wait, that’s the end, troll script’s right to left. I don’t really remember much of the others.”

“Thank you, Jade, now we know, this might begin or end with an A,” Dave said with a sardonic smile. “We’ve solved the mystery.”

“Oh, shush, I’ve been trying to get a handle on their language. I was kind of hoping it would help with some things, but… It’s kind of hard, since they aren’t really willing to use it around us.” Jade clicked on the movie and they waited for it to buffer.

“I hope this helps solve the mystery and doesn’t make there be more questions,” John said. “Like can
you imagine if this is like some terrible softcore porn? That would create more questions than answers.”

“It would solve if Gamzee was a criminal or not,” Rose said. “If the word on him means something innocent, I don’t think we’ll have an issue with him.”

“Unless he was charged as the killer cuddler. He would sneak in make sweet sweet snuggles with you, then strangle you.” How Dave managed to say half the things he did with a straight face Rose would never know.

“Hey, looks like they got an actual highblood for this one.” John pointed at the blue-eyed male troll in the still shot. “Guess this must have a better budget than a lot of that stuff. Ah, never mind, it’s still funny.”

“I’m lining up my best riffs already,” Dave said, raising his fist for a bump. Jade clicked. This video was dimly lit, the music more eerie than annoying.

“Oh wow, that’s weird,” Rose said. “In all of these videos the difference between blood colors has never been that dramatic, a red- I mean, a maroonblood and a blueblood?” The much smaller troll was lying on a mattress, or something similar. It was bare but for her, no blankets or pillows, and she was already lacking clothes. All of the humans could pick up that she was afraid; after the acting bad enough to cross language barriers in the previous videos, it was hard to remember this one was also fake.

The blueblood came up to her, the music going nearly silent. What happened next moved so fast they weren’t entirely sure what they saw. He grabbed her, and moved her, and everything about it just looked painful. The smaller troll was crying, but not screaming, she didn’t say anything or make much noise other than sobs she couldn’t contain. All of the humans were staring at the screen, wide-eyed and shocked.

The blueblood grabbed onto her throat and said something, and after that she did speak. The humans backed up from the screen; it all looked too real, and the noises and the actions translated across the universe. All of them were staring and couldn’t look away. This was bad, they could see it from this side of the culture schism.

The video went dark and troll script appeared on the screen. Obviously, it was a teaser for a longer movie, but they couldn’t even process that at that moment. They didn’t click, instead all of them just stared and tried to come to terms with what they just saw.
“Well, fuck,” Dave said, trying to regain his composure.

“That… that noise she kept making? ‘Anjya’?” Jade swallowed. “That’s the Alternian word for ‘no’.”

“You mean…?” John asked, looking grim. “She kept telling him no, that means…”

“Gamzee’s been labeled. Of course rape wouldn’t be punishable by death in such an already-violent culture. But instead he’s forced to wear his crimes. Very medieval of them… His scarlet letter, or possibly purple letter.” Rose twisted her pencil nervously in her fingers. “At least we have an answer to the question of what he did.”

Jade looked horrified. “Oh my god! I was alone in the room with him at least once… well, not alone, Bec was there. Good thing too.” She shivered.

"Okay, let’s not panic," Rose said, taking Jade’s hand and squeezing it. "It’s entirely possible it was a one-off and he regrets it now. On the other hand, it’s also possible that it wasn’t."

Dave paced up and down, hand in his hair. “Fuck, I can get why Shouty McNubs would stick around, he can handle himself and they did say their thing was meant to stop them being violent, but why the hell is that cute little guy with the wings hanging out with this maniac?” He looked up, horrified, and added “And what about Nepeta?"

“Oh shit, what might he do to her?” John stopped gnawing his lip long enough to speak.

“Actually I was thinking more of what she might do to him, or someone else,” Dave said. “I thought she was cool, but he and fishtroll picked her to keep both of them in line - fuck, she takes down deer bare-handed, what if she turned her claws on a troll some time? Or a human?”

“Oh crap. They don’t have any sopor slime left,” John said, eyes widening. “Do you think that stuff really might be a… a chemical castration thing, or something?"

“Could be. I don’t know why he’d be so keen to eat it if it was…” Jade said. “Then again, how addictive is it?”
“Going by how he was shovelling that jello down?” Dave sucked in air between his teeth. “Very.”

“There is a chance that they are running,” Rose said. “Not to escape the Empire because of their harsh laws, but to escape their criminal pasts. They could be giving us only the smallest details about the actual truth of Alternia in trade for their cover. I’m not saying we should jump to conclusions, but it might be good for us to be a little safer. Also, on the topic of Nepeta, she can keep Equius in line, and him existing is nearly enough to break a person’s hand.”

“I have spare cans of mace, if anyone wants some.” Jade gripped Bec’s collar. “I’ll keep Bec around, too. We probably should make sure we stay in twos, and be really careful once Equius is out and about again.”

“I think Eridan’s on my side,” John added. “Though maybe I shouldn’t get too reliant on him, since I don’t know what he did. But he seems to really like me, hopefully enough that he won’t want to piss me off by hurting you guys. And he did seem pretty genuinely horrified when I thought he was trying to get in my pants, so at least I’m probably safe there.”

“Yeah, just gotta worry about him eating your skin.”

“Not helping, Dave.”

~END OF ARC 2~
“Hey, Eridan, can we ta- what the hell are you wearing?”

Eridan finished tying the ribbon in his hair and turned, fluffing the skirt, which John recognised as one of Jade’s. “Look, you said you only wanted women in your stupid single quadrant, so I thought this might help you make the adjustment even if our thing doesn’t involve fucking.”

John stared at the tall, wirily-muscled, clearly male troll in a too-short tartan skirt. And knee socks, which had been torn through at the ends by his claws. And makeup in colours John recognised as belonging to Rose - again, God, she was going to kill Eridan if she found out. “Please tell me those aren’t my socks in your shirt.”

Eridan self-consciously crossed his arms over the lumpy bulges in his tube top. “I would, but lying to a potential moirail is frowned on.”

“Okay, pretending that nothing weird is going on here, I have a question. If I was in my bed and, say, for some reason, I yelled, would you be able to hear me if you were underwater in the tub?”

“Yeah, I could hear you… Are you worried someone might attack you or are you just askin’ because you want to know if I would protect you?”

“Well, that leads to my next question; do you keep your gun charged at all times?”

“Except for right after I shoot it, yeah, I do. Are you askin’ if I’d protect you in the hypothetical case someone attacked? Because if that’s your next question, of course I would.”

“Uh, yeah, something like that.”

Eridan chuckled. “Suddenly our conversational roles seem to be reversed from the usual. Why are you asking? Somefin troublin’ you?”

“Uhhhh… Nightmares. Yeah,” John said hurriedly. “It’ll make me feel a lot better to know you’re around.”

Eridan smiled; it was obvious how much John’s statement had hit the troll. “I’ll keep you safe. Promise. I’m a damn good fighter, and I have plenty of experience. You have nothin’ to worry about while I’m here.”

“Thanks.” John blinked again at Eridan and just what he was wearing. “Would you go change? I can’t pretend this isn’t weird anymore.”

Eridan started to remove the tube top immediately, and John was surprised when he didn’t feel the urge to run screaming. Now he knew the troll’s actual intentions, he could see that Eridan clearly wasn’t trying to be sexual; he was moving in a businesslike manner, not hiding but not intentionally displaying, as if he was entirely alone in the room.

John shrugged and went to his bookshelf, keeping his back turned until Eridan was done. “Hey, do you want to borrow any of these? I think you’d like Harry Potter. Just don’t get them wet.”

Eridan was back in his clothes, the borrowed ones neatly folded over his arm. He joined John by the bookcase and looked over the spines of the novels, then towards John. “I do like readin’, wwhat’s this ‘Harry Potter’ about? I don’t think my translator is being much help. Seein’ as the wwords have
definitions but that sounds like a name. Unless that’s his title or somethin’, but that seems like a pretty sad title.”

“No, it’s a name. It’s about this boy who finds out he’s a wizard and goes to magic school, and… well, it’s a lot more exciting than I’m making it sound. You liked Rose’s wizard story, so I figured you’d like this.”

Eridan scoffed, rubbing off his eyeliner. “Huh, w wizards are fakey fake made-up stuff for w wrigglers…” He looked at the book again. “You sure you’re okay w with me borrowwing it?”

John laughed and, on a whim, patted Eridan’s back. “Sure.”

Eridan purred. John felt odd when he realised how happy it made him to see Eridan happy. When Eridan wasn’t being creepily pushy or boastful he was kind of a cool guy, and from what John had heard he’d had a rough time lately and needed a friend. It felt less weird if he didn’t think of it in terms of a romantic thing, but even that was bothering him less and less. He wondered if this was what it was like to have a little brother. Probably not, but it was the closest he was likely to get.

~~~

“Mother, could we perhaps talk for a moment?”

“Oh? Sure, Rosey dear,” said Dr Lalonde, sloshing vodka over her hand as she turned around and hurriedly shifting her arm away from the machine. “What about?”

“Well.” Rose pointed to the vodka bottle. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for you to be drinking that while you’re in the lab alone with the trolls.”

“Oh, darling, don’t worry, it won’t affect my reshtuls! They draw mosht of the diagrams for me an’ I can fill out the reportsh in my sleep.”

“That’s not quite what I meant. I just thought it might not be a good idea to become inebriated around… people?… who are openly violent and have admitted to cannibalism.”

“Listen, babe, they’re not here for anything bad. They’re jush… shcared, losht, and very very lonely. They have eashother but that’s not mush against a whole rag—reag—world. They’re not going to hurt me or you, they’re not going to eat us either. We keep them pretty well fed, so don’t worry your pretty little head about it, okay?”

Rose let her mother pat her head, quietly indignant. “Still. I’m not quite sure…” She bit her lip. She couldn’t say it. It had been bad enough getting the talk about self-defence and what to do if something bad happened from her mother. Giving it to her mother was unbearable. She weighed her embarrassment against the potential horrors of leaving Gamzee alone with her mother. Maybe she could avoid either by making sure her mother never was alone with him. Could she trust any of the trolls? Well, she’d been alone with Kanaya plenty of times and come out unscathed. John had had no problems with Eridan, and Feferi had slept in Rose’s bathtub without providing any cause for alarm. Then again, they weren’t the ones under direct suspicion. Gamzee had a “scarlet letter” detailing his crimes. Feferi could really be a runaway princess, all of them could be running away. Maybe they didn’t even really know what he did. Either that or the trolls had the ability to forgive horrific crimes. Rose sighed.

“What ish it, babe?” Her mother shifted some papers, but was looking at her. “What’s on your mind?”

“I just don’t know, isn’t a little odd how nice the aliens are? Or how they’ve demanded very little,
they’ve always tried to give back… it’s just strange.”

“You watch too many scary movies. Not every alien race in the universe can be evil, bent on taking over the world. Even if they are from that species, not all those aliens would be evil. That’s a terrible stereotype.”

“Mother, look at them. Far be it from me to judge a book by its cover, but we’ve metaphorically been flicking through their contents long enough to know they could be dangerous if they chose.”

“And they haven’t!” Dr Lalonde chirped, rearranging her papers. “They had plenty of chances to make trouble, and they didn’t! Why would they wait this long?”

It was a good question, and all Rose could think to answer with was that they enjoyed playing an extended game of cat and mouse. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to actually speak of her worries, instead she’d have to settle on trying to convince her mother that they were dangerous, or at least could be terribly dangerous, and she should be on her guard.

“Well, just to be sure, Mom… I know it probably should be you saying this to me, but I’d feel a lot happier if you borrowed some of Jade’s pepper spray. Just in case.” Rose produced a tube of said substance and offered it, inwardly sighing with relief when her mother pocketed it without question.

“Dr Lalonde?” Karkat appeared in the doorway. “You said our blood test results were done? Oh, hey, Rose.”

“Hi,” Rose said shortly, looking briefly back at her mother. She was probably worrying over nothing. This was a grown woman she was thinking about, surely she could handle herself. Perhaps to be on the safe side she’d ask Jade and Dave how one went about bugging a room, so they could keep an eye, or ear, on proceedings in the basement.

As Rose passed Karkat on the stairs, she hissed in his direction “Tell your purple friend to stay away from my mother.”

Karkat blinked, then yelled back to the hall “Eridan, what the fuck did you do this time?”

Rose headed back for the house, trying to keep herself from hesitating or hanging around longer than necessary; she knew that it would be enough for a perceptive troll or human to figure out exactly what she was doing. Instead she shut the door behind her, and watched as Eridan and Vriska both made their way to the basement. She took a breath. She hoped they found better evidence one way or another soon. This whole ordeal was much too stressful.

~~~

“So, explain to me what this part of the blood test thing is for, again?”

“Well, Karkat, it’s quite simple.” Dr Lalonde cleared her throat and tried to speak more clearly, putting the colourful vials into the bizarre-looking machine. “Your ‘genetic material’ carries info about you, see? And it mixes all up in the bucket, yes? And from there it goes to the eggs. Am I right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the blood test shows up the info from the bucket. Shows all the little bits of code which make up a troll. Oh, I’m too drunk to explain this right,” she said, waving at the folder on the desk. “Read that, it’ll give you better description.”

“Wait, so, what, you have the same coding stuff as your ancestors did?” Eridan’s eye lit up.
“Yes! Clever troll.” Dr Lalonde tried to pat his head, missed, and slapped one of his horns.

“Uh, so, from that, you could… find out who my relatives are?” Eridan was blushing violet. “Wwe’d be the first trolls to knoww more than one of their ancestors, wwouldn’t that be awwesome?”

“You know who at least one of your relatives was,” Vriska pointed out. “And I’m pretty sure there’s some of my ancestor in you as well, if her journal’s anything to go by.”

“Well, yeah, but…” Eridan sighed. “Dualscar was a douchebag. There, I said it. I’m hopin’ I havwe some better relatives out there. Ones who didn’t torture slaves for fun or get murdered by a clownn.”

“We can’t really know, most of our ancestors are dead, it’s not like we can test them,” Karkat said. Dr Lalonde was securing a strap around his arm to she could draw blood again. “You’d only be able to see if you’re related to any of us. And I’m pretty sure that when all that genetic material gets mixed it blends with a lot of trolls’ genetic material. I don’t know really, I’d have to talk to Kanaya about the finer points of mothergrubs.”

“She once told me it goes into something like pots, and the Mother Grub has a bunch of them. Then picks a few of them to use for the clutch. Like the drones drop ten pails into these things as then they fill up another one.”

“So, Eridan, you technically have nine more opportunities for better ancestors.”

“Well, that’s true, but Kan also said that wwho pails wwith wwho creates a binding. Like the genes in the pail all mix up together and start merging so you’re closer to your ancestors than the other trolls.”

“So Mindfang, and whoever he was matesprits with. Did he have a matesprit?”

“It’s not like he left me a journal, Wris. He had to havwe had one, if not he wouldn’t have been culled.”

“I don’t know if rules were that strict back then…” Vriska said with a shrug, taking up Karkat’s now vacant seat. “He must have though, it requires both donations to make a descendant. At least that’s how I understood it.”

“I’m… pretty sure exceptions have happened,” Karkat murmured.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“All this wwould be a lot easier if Kan wwas downn here to answwer our questions. Wwho wwould havwe thought wwe’d know so little about the proliferation of our species…”

“I’ll talk more about it with her, jush don’t worry about it.” Dr Lalonde smiled. “You all don’t carry your babiesh. It’s not shurpre-shurprising you don’t know exactly how it works. Thish testin’ shuff is just the basics. I’m going to have ta talk to you all lots about thingsh. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, Doc, it’s okay.” Vriska nodded. “You’ve been nice enough to feed us and give us shelter, giving you a bit of our blood isn’t too much trouble.” Eridan raised his eyebrow.

“Wwhy are you bein’ so nice, Vris? It’s isn’t like you.”
Vriska glared. “I’m really interested actually. I want to know what our blood says, how cool is that?”

“Ish not exactly like that, wait an’ I’ll show you.” Dr Lalonde turned towards a machine with the twelve vials of blood she had collected. “Thish may sound weird but ish pretty. Your blood, it’sh pretty.”

“Must be wwhy sub—” Eridan started, but Karkat abruptly cut him off.

“Thanks, I guess, it’s just blood. Stupid caste designating blood. But still just blood.”

Dr Lalonde switched on the machine and let parts spin, lights flash, and moving parts move, the three trolls watching. After what seemed like ages in relative silence, aside from Dr Lalonde moving some papers, a printout appeared on the other side with a grating noise as it severed one line of paper, and started printing out more. Dr Lalonde looked over them for a brief moment, shuffled through them to find the right ones, then handed them to their respective trolls.

“Thish sh-should show you all whose genes you’re closher to. Or closhest.”

All of them looked over their respective papers, full of data and human abbreviations and scientific gibberish lost on the trolls. What made sense was a graph at the bottom of each sheet, peaks and troughs showing various genetic markers. The trolls compared theirs.

“So I actually am related to you?” Vriska’s nose wrinkled as she saw significant similarities between hers and Eridan’s. “Ewwwwwwww.”

“Oh, thanks!”

“Wouldn’t have thought it. We don’t exactly look alike.”

Eridan frowned in thought. “No, but… gimme your glasses. Here, take mine as hostage if you don’t trust me wwith ‘em.” They exchanged glasses, and Eridan lifted the non-blackened lens of Vriska’s to his eye and peered through it. “Same prescription. Huh. That’s kinda cool to knoww.”

“Yeah… Looks like you’re not very close to us, Karkat. Sorry your genes suck.” Karkat made an obscene gesture, and Vriska snickered.

“Hey, guyth, what’th going on?” Sollux and Feferi appeared in the doorway.

“Finding out how closely related we are,” Karkat said, waving the printout. Sollux took his and squinted at the remaining ones arranged on the table.

“That’th weird. Thayth I’m pretty clothe to KN and NP here…”

“Yeah, I’m guessing what happened is Psiioniic and the ladies had to fill pails together to avoid suspicion. I mean, Signless couldn’t very well fill one in front of a drone or he’d have been caught much sooner, wouldn’t he?”

“That and-slash-or multiple generythings… generations could ha’ passhed and all your lines crosshed over with each other.” Dr Lalonde sipped her drink again and counted briefly on her fingers. “You did say that wash a long time back.”

“I hope that’s wwhat’s goin’ on wwith us and Kan,” Eridan whispered to Vriska, pointing to a few peaks on his and Vriska’s graphs and then to the printout labelled with Kanaya’s name. “Our last knowwn ancestors an’ hers… don’t bear thinkin’ about.”
“Yeah. Maybe all of us are closer than we’d like to admit,” Vriska mumbled. “Hey, Doc, I have a question… It’s widely believed on Alternia that you inherit your ancestor’s problems, like if your ancestor hated a troll you’ll end up hating that troll or their descendant. Do you think there might be some genes for that? Obviously, I hated Eridan for while, but it didn’t stick around, but Mindfang’s hatred for him faded by the time she found her matesprit.”

“Oh? Oh!” Dr Lalonde let out a little laugh. “I forgot that you romantically hate. It’s unlikely, but maybe it has something to do with pheromones, or the like. I can see, but to do that I’d need axsaess to see to a bigger g’nome. DNA doesn’t read like a novel, all I can see is similarities.”

Karkat frowned at his. “That’s funny, I’d have thought mine would be linked with Nepeta’s, but it’s not, much. I guess Sufferer and Disciple really couldn’t fill a pail…”

Dr Lalonde frowned at the results. “Sorry, but no. Nepeta’s closhest link is Equius. I’ll have to ask them about that…”

“Huh, I could have sworn…” Karkat trailed off, and hurriedly stood in front of Gamzee’s printout. He dipped his finger in a splash of spilled vodka and wiped it over Gamzee’s name, blurring the ink. A useless gesture as process of elimination could find it immediately, but it made him feel a little better. “Am I close to anyone? Anyone at all.”

“Not that I see. Little bits with everyone, yeah, but that could be background troll genes, this’sh just a very simple test… I’ll get better ‘quipment ASAP.”

“Since he’s not here yet… Karkat, are we supposed to tell Gamzee if we’re related to him genetically? Or do you think that would make him triple-axel off the rage handle? I mean, I don’t think any of us are, but… If we are?” Vriska asked slowly.

“I would say probably don’t tell him. Unless he brings it up. There is actually a reason for it, but it’s diamond stuff. So don’t ask me or him what it is. Reminds me, I should go check on him and make sure he hasn’t broken the training robot again. We need that one, it took Equius long enough to build it with the shit materials we have here and I don’t have the first clue how to fix the fucking thing…”

Four of the five trolls headed outside, Feferi lurking behind, examining the papers and chewing her lip.

“Hm? Oh, Feferi. Did you want to ask someth’n’?”

Feferi held out the paper with her results. “Are you sure these are right?” She picked up the smudged graph in the other hand. “Everyone else has much smaller similarities, this one’s almost half the same as mine. I didn’t even think our breeding allowed for that.”

“Someone sent in a lot of buckets at once?” Dr Lalonde said with a shrug which threatened to spill her martini.

“Yeah… Maybe..” Feferi looked grim. “I was curious, is there a margin of error or something?” She looked down at the test results.

“Do you want me to tesht you again? It could have been an error, but I was shure that there wasn’t a problem.”

“If you could. Even if it’s not, I just need to be sure.”

“Okay, Feferi, I can do that. Sit your cute little booty down and give me your arm.”
Feferi silently let her blood be drawn and watched the machine chug away, Dr Lalonde pressing buttons and dripping in pigments as needed. The printer attachment finally whirred and spat out a sheet; Feferi took it and saw it was identical to the original one.

"Huh. That is really weird. I guess if it didn’t make a mistake with mine it’s not likely to have with the other…” She held up the other result to the light and put her result graph over it. The peaks and troughs were too similar for coincidence. "Okay, which one is…” She squinted as closely as she could at the ruined name at the bottom of the offending graph, and almost dropped the papers.

Dr Lalonde checked the names on the remaining graphs and peered over her shoulder. “Hm. Now I think about it, Gamzee doesh look a bit like you. Fluff up your hair a bit… yep.”

Feferi stared at Dr Lalonde, not really looking at her, just trying to come to terms with what she just learned. The Empress and the Highblood were their ancestors. Not hers and his, they were both theirs. Feferi licked her lips nervously, trying to figure out what she was supposed to do with this knowledge. Maybe it was better if trolls never learned who their bloodlinks were.
Chapter 45

Nepeta mewed sadly in her sleep and cuddled up closer to the huge blue cocoon. Just halfway through Equius’ pupation, it wouldn’t be too long before he hatched. She missed him terribly, even if technically he was still there; she wished she could talk to him properly. She’d told him all the funny things that had happened that day, everything Sollux had managed to find through their radio connection, details about the weather. Everything she could think of, until her throat was sore. She hoped he could hear her, though if he couldn’t she’d tell him again. She rather looked forward to seeing his face when he found out what Dr Lalonde had discovered, that they were… what was it? Not as close as littermates, but definitely connected. Cousins, perhaps, like Rose and Dave or John and Jade. Yes, cousins, she liked that word, it sounded like “cozy”, and that was how she felt when cuddled up to him. She couldn’t wait for him to be out of the cocoon so they could cuddle up properly again.

When she had pupated, she told Equius it wouldn’t be so bad. Only a short amount of time they would be separated. Now she wish she had never said those words. Even a few weeks felt terrible. A noise in the hallway pulled her from her sleep; she could feel her hackles rising, ready to fight. A troll was weak when they were in cocoon, and she was ready to defend her moirail to the death.

She was equipping her clawkind when there was a soft knock at the door. Usually threats didn’t knock. She tried to relax a little, but something about having any number of trolls too close to her defenseless palemate made it impossible to fully relax.

“Nep, it’s us. You’ve been in there forever, come out here.”

She took a breath, and forced herself to relax with a shake of her limbs. Her ashmates wouldn’t do anything, not if they wanted to keep what they had. Plus anyway it was underhanded and crude to kill a troll during pupation.

“Kittysis.” Gamzee’s voice sounded like he was nearly singing. “Come on out. I’m sure Equius won’t mind. Come on.” She heard Eridan mutter something, and then stop suddenly. She could only assume Gamzee had playfully elbowed him in the ribs. She was going to take it as playful and not let it infringe on the progress they had made. She moved forward, opening the door after another quick breath. It was funny how far removed they could be from Alternia and still be terrified that someone who meant harm would show up. Eridan and Gamzee were caught, frozen, Eridan about to punch Gamzee in retaliation for the hit the taller troll had landed earlier.

“I can’t leave you both alone long enough to take a catnap!” she said, shaking her head. Not really mad, more just used to them. “What did you want?”

“I hawe somethin’ I want to talk about, Nep. Since I don’t have a moirail… well. Just let me talk to you about it.”

Nepeta looked back at the cocoon, she held in her sigh. “Alright.” She nodded. “Let’s talk.” She left the room, taking them out to the corner of their common sleeping area all of them had designated as the jam corner. The three of them sat down on the premade pile of pillows and blankets that the trolls had also shamefully decided to be the community pile.

“So what did you want to talk about, fishbro?”

“Eridan called this to order, okay. What’s going on, Eridan?”

“Guess wwhat happened,” Eridan said, grinning smugly.

“What?”

“No, go on, guess.”

“You learned to tell left from right without flashcards?”

“Gamzee!” Nepeta swatted gently at his hand. “Go on, Eridan. Was it something to do with John?”

“Yep. He said somefin about nightmares, asked if I could hear him if he yelled. I said I’d keep an eye on him, and he said that made him feel better. See, he totally knowws wwho’s the superior species here, he wwants a sawwy troll protector.”

“Aww, congrats! I guess that might be why he was kinda less friendly than usual with me and Karbro today. Still insecure, that’s so motherfucking cute.” Gamzee sighed wistfully.

“That’s wonderful!” Nepeta clasped her paws in glee. "Now I have to update my shipping wall!"

"Wwhoa, sloww dowwn, Nep," Eridan chuckled. "Wwe’we not actually said the wwords yet, but yeah, it’s lookin’ pretty pale, and not just in that wweird humans-pity-eweryone wway. Just you wwatch, I’m gonna hawe him eatin’ outta the palm of my hand in a wweek."

Gamzee made an uncomfortable noise.

"Huh? Oh fuck." Eridan scooted away. "Wwas that one of those things that happened during that thing I’m not supposed to mention? Fuck fuck fuck, I’m sorry I’m sorry-"

"Hey, cool it! I’m not gonna attack you over you mentioning something I never motherfucking told you about!"

"Awww, you’re making such good purrogress!" Nepeta pulled the boys back into their huddle, and purred happily.

“Club you both, Catfish.”

“I really wwish you’d stop saying that.”

“Only thing that could make it worse would be a bad joke, but I’ll keep the joke inside. I won’t stop saying that though. It’s too perfect.”

“Well.” Nepeta derailed that conversation. Gamzee’s terrible jokes usually involved death, his sense of humor far darker now than it was before conscription. “Now you have another steady quadrant. I’m happy for you, Eridan… I hope this one turns out better than the one with Feferi did. Though I think it will. John is very very nice. But enough of a jerk to make sure you stay inline.”

“Yeah, I like him too, he’s funny,” said Gamzee, smiling a little. “And I’d guess everyone else will be in favour of keeping the guy who makes food happy. Don’t keep all the cake to yourself, okay, fishbro?”

"Heh, yeah, don’t wworry, there’s no chance of me screwwing this up the wway I did wwith Fef. Strictly pale this time. Wwhat can I say, my diamond belongs to the derpy ones. Sorta like Taw, except Egbert’s cuter.” Gamzee sat up and glared, raising a fist. Eridan smirked at him, and said in a smug singsong tone “Ah ah ah. Nep’s here, you can’t do nofin.”
Nepeta looked up at Gamzee, and shook her head. “Nah, I’m on your side on that one. Get him.”

Eridan had enough time to squeak “Wwhat?!” before he found himself in a headlock. Gamzee and Nepeta’s fingers ran down his sides quickly, and he shrieked in laughter, trying to squirm away. He gasped back in this position once more, he couldn’t deny the tinge of fear in his head as neither of them let up after a moment of getting him back. He kicked forward, almost nailing Gamzee under the chin. Nepeta pounced on his legs to keep him still. Her fingers running over his legs and attacking the backs of his knees. He gasped trying to break up his laughter enough to talk.

“No, no!” he said breathlessly. “Not again!”

“Not what again, fishbro?” Gamzee’s voice sounded too chipper to be comforting. Eridan squealed as the attacks continued with renewed fervor. He tried to shake Nepeta off of his legs, and get Gamzee off his arms.

“S-stop!” he choked out, his sides sore. “Please, stop!” He waited for the attack to continue, but both of the trolls pulled their hands away from him. He quirked his brow, catching his breath, his core sore from laughing. “Huh. You stopped,” he gasped, surprised.

“Well, yeah. We’re not trying to kill you.”

“Don’t make fun of another’s flushcrush, Erifin,” Nepeta said, sticking out her tongue. “It’s low.”

“I was just teasin’!”

“Fishbro, we ain’t really mad, we’re just teasing you back.”

Nepeta crawled off Eridan’s legs and settled down in the pile trying to ignore the way Eridan was glaring at Gamzee, though she was pretty sure nothing would come from it. Eventually Eridan just shrugged and accepted it for what it was. Nepeta didn’t want to be proud of all their progress but she was. “… you know, it’s probably a bad idea with Gamzee, but if it’s me, you can fight back.”

Eridan looked at her. “Eh?”

“If we end up messing around again you can fight back.”

“Uh, you’re right, Nep’s okay but it might be a bad idea in my case,” Gamzee said. “I don’t wanna hurt you on reflex again. If I hurt you now it’s totally motherfucking deliberate.”

“Heyyy.” Eridan nudged him in the arm, and he only chuckled in response. “That’s okay, I’ll find somefin else I can bother you wwith.”

“Sounds fair.”

Nepeta smiled, grabbing on to the other two troll’s hands and gave them a squeeze before she pulled away with a smile. “Haasmuneeru, Clownfish.”

“No fair, I can’t think of a snappy nickname for you twoo…”

“Calico.”

“What?”

“You know, those cats with the spots,” Nepeta explained. “Like Gamzee’s polka-dot clothes?”

“Huh. Yeah, okay.” Eridan reached up for fist-bumps. “Ashen for you both, Calico.”
“… it’s tiimie to make neeeew Squiddle friends!” Jade finished the song with a flourish which echoed off the surrounding trees, then realised Tavros was sniffing. “Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to make you sad!” She put down her guitar and decaptchalogued some tissues. “Here.”

“It’s, uhh, okay,” Tavros mumbled, mopping up his copper-tinted tears. “It just… hit close to home. With us being runaways and all.” He accepted Jade’s hug.

“Okay, I’ll sing something happier now… Hey, you know something? I read this book when I was a kid - it was in the same series as the one with the mice I lent you, you remember that one? I’ll get that one out some time, you might like it. Anyway, there was a boy in it who had a really bad stammer, but it went away when he sang, and he managed to make it go away forever by practising his singing a lot. Do you think it might be worth trying?”

“Huh. I don’t know, I don’t think I’ve ever sung much before,” Tavros said thoughtfully. “Gamzee and I like to, uhh, do slam poetry battles, but neither of us is all that good, and, uhh, we haven’t done that in a while.”

“Slam poetry?”

“It’s where you say words, in a rhythm. They can rhyme or not, but they have to fit a flow, and if they don’t rhyme, they have to be close.”

“Oh, okay, I didn’t know if it was what it sounded like or something else.”

“I’ve never sung, really, I guess it wasn’t a thing that ever, uhh, really came up. But I guess I could try. I don’t know though, you might have to teach me a, uhh, human song, because I don’t know that many Alternian ones, that don’t praise the Empire in some way.” Tavros thought for a minute. “Actually, uhh, start playing something fairly simple, and give me a moment. I think you’ll like this.”

Jade started strumming away, and Tavros rested his claws on his temples and concentrated

“Bai lang tao tao wo bu pa, zhang qi duo er wang qian hua…”

As Jade sang, she realised she had accompaniment. Birdsong was ringing from the trees, just one bird at first, then more joined, and soon she had a full orchestra in tune with her guitar. She gazed around in wonder, not ceasing to play, and one by one the birds flew down and started to perch around them, one landing on Tavros’ left horn. She finished the song, put down her guitar, and reached out; a small fat wren perched on her fingertip and piped the song again.

“Oh! Oh my god, this is just the cutest thing ever! Thank you. I feel like a Disney princess!” Tavros smiled and looked at the birds surrounding them. He moved one hand away from his head and ran the tips of his claws with the flow of the birds feathers. He slowly pulled his concentration away, leaving the faintest trails so the birds would stay and be calm, but act relatively normally. “I can’t teach you songs, but I can give you some from nature.” Tavros bit his lip slightly. “I hope it’s enough.”

“Aw, you didn’t have to do anything! I’m happy to teach you.” Jade reached down and plucked a few notes with her left hand, and the bird on her right hand returned them. “But I’m glad you did do this. It’s amazing. Here, take him…” She placed the bird on Tavros’ horn, and giggled. “Okay, if you want to try this one’s pretty simple word-wise…” She picked up her instrument again.

Jade sometimes had the patience of a saint, and at that moment it benefited her as she went through
easy chords and simple words. Teaching Tavros a basic human song was a bit more taxing than she had expected; he couldn’t seem to always keep his voice on just the center vocal chord and new chirps were added or something similar. It was more cute than annoying, and he would always blush afterwards and apologise. Soon enough they managed to get him singing a rough approximation of “Home on the Range”; his voice wasn’t as bad as he’d thought it would be, and his stammer did indeed disappear once he’d got into it.

“Hey, see? You’re getting really good! I told you it would work.”

“I don’t stutter once when I sing and rhyme, maybe I should do this all the time!” Tavros sang, and winked. They both laughed. “Uh. So.” He shifted and blushed. “I was, uhh, thinking, and… you’re being so nice to me, and teaching me, all this stuff. Is there anything you’d, um, like to teach you? Like, uhh… maybe you’d like a refresher on how quadrants work? Oh my God I can’t believe I said that.” He blushed and covered his face.

Jade smiled and raised an eyebrow. “You know, Gamzee talked to me about you, and now I look back, he wasn’t terribly subtle. We’re talking about the pale quadrant thing, right? What exactly does that involve, in detail? I don’t think either of us need pacifying, but Gamzee said it also works to stop a troll being dangerous to themselves…”

“Gamzee really isn’t known for being subtle.. It’s, uhh, not something he does well. He’s tried, on many occasions, and failed.” Tavros could feel his blush darkening. He’d talk to Gamzee about his terribly unsubtle discussion later. “It’s like a friendship, but different. Let’s see, how do I explain this easily? Uhh, say there are two people or trolls, okay? Well, person A has some problems, and they can’t easily get over them. That’s where person B steps in and helps. Person A then further helps person B with their problems. Sort of, uhh, without this troll or human, I wouldn’t be where I am, or sane.”

“Oh, I see.”

“But, either person would help the other keep from doing dumb things, or anything else that might endanger them. Remember this whole thing started so a troll would live long enough to, uhh, breed. Is this, ah, making more sense?” Jade nodded. “Honestly, I think it might be a bit high-pressure for, uhh, someone who’s never heard of it. Ideally, um, if a moirail’s in trouble, the other is supposed to drop everything and do everything possible to help right away. But then you always know your moirail will do the same for you.”

Jade chewed her lip. “Well, yeah, that sounds sweet but, as you say, high pressure. I guess I sort of have practice because humans are supposed to help out all their friends, but focusing on one person that strongly… I don’t know, I guess I could try it. Just start slow, maybe?”

Tavros’ eyes lit up. “Really? Y-you want to?”

Jade almost pinched his cheeks at his eagerness. “As long as you don’t mind going slow… and maybe helping me along. I’m worried I’d mess it up. You’d tell me if I’m doing things wrong, right?”

Tavros nodded. “Of course. I wouldn’t think that, uhh, it would be right to rush you. This concept of romance is so, uhh, new to you.” Tavros smiled. Jade couldn’t help but return the smile. She cleared her throat.

“So, what do we do?”

“It’s not much different than what we were, uhh, doing. You talk, do things together. It’s like your
family, only with someone who isn’t, uhh, connected by blood.”

“I think I can do that.” Jade punctuated her sentence with a nod. “You know, this is pretty funny. I’ve had guys at parties ask if I’d make out with their girlfriends, but this is the first time I’ve had a guy want me to enter a potentially long-term relationship with his boyfriend.”

“Yeah, actually this was pretty odd by troll standards, too. Usually it’s your moirail, who finds you a matesprit, not the other way round.” Tavros shook his head and smiled. “None of us really seem to do things the usual way, though.”

“I think Gamzee’s right, though, this could work. So what do we do to make it official? Kiss, or is that just for the breeding quadrants?”

“Uhh, yeah, that’s mostly a concupiscent thing. For conciliatory quadrants…” Tavros curled his hand into a loose fist and held it up. “… we fist-bump.”

Jade gave a little laugh, before she raised her fist. “Really, a fist bump? Fist bumps are a universal thing?”

“In the past, or if you’re feeling, uhh, traditional you can also…” Tavros extended his middle and index finger into a sideways V, and showed Jade. “Both make a, uhh, diamond. But most younger trolls fist bump it’s less… Obvious. It’s, uhh, not as flirty. But, uhh, you can do it if there need to be a, uhh, obvious declaration of pity.”

“Okay…” Jade formed her own fingers into a V, and touched the tips lightly against Tavros’. He blushed orange, and she suppressed the urge to squeal. He was adorable. Bec sniffed his ear and licked his face, and he burst into giggles.

“Okay, down, boy! Hehehe, well, your not-lusus likes me. Wish I could meet your… parents, is that the right word?”

“That’s the right word. My parents travel a lot, you’d be better off meeting my grandpa, he is the one who really raised me. Used to take me on all his adventures. Then I started to attend private school, so I had to spend less time with him. I’m trying to convince my whole family to let me take a year off before I start college, so I can backpack around the world. They’re not too thrilled about that though. But I want to go on an adventure. Then again, meeting aliens is kind of an adventure. I guess I did get what I wished for.”

Tavros nodded. “I’d like to see more of your planet. I’ve seen some of the scenery in films, and I think it’s beautiful. Maybe if we win against the Empress, I can go with you. I can take you around Alternia, then. You could see my home.”

“I think I might like to see an alien planet, that would be a great adventure.”

“I can show you around, and you’d be the first human to do space travel, and go through wormholes. That’s a pretty good story at least…”

“Yeah, that’d be amazing…” Jade trailed off, then cleared her throat and spoke again. “So. Moirails are supposed to be honest with each other, right?” Tavros nodded, and Jade continued. “Is it okay if I ask a really awkward question?”

Tavros giggled. “It’s okay, Jade, you taught me to sing - in return, I’ll answer anything!”

Jade looked sideways at him and said, mock-casually, “So… how did Eridan really lose that eye? I don’t think he’s going to tell me.”
The blood drained from Tavros’ face, and he looked at the ground. “… anything except that.”

“Oh, is it that bad? I’m sorry, you don’t have to tell me.”

“No, it’s okay. If I don’t you’ll keep wondering, and it’ll just gnaw at you, until it comes out at a worse time.” Tavros sighed. “Uhh. Well. We told you about auspisticism, right? And how Nepeta stepped in for Gamzee and Eridan? Remember you all laughed, when Eridan said Gamzee kicked him in the crotch once? It wasn’t very funny at the time. He actually got really badly hurt. He ended up bleeding from… you know. And Gamzee was pretty mad all the time then, he was saying he’d do all sorts of horrible things. I don’t think he would have gone as far as he said, but…”

Jade’s shoulders tensed; she wondered if this was going to answer all of their questions. Even if it did, Jade wasn’t exactly sure she wanted to know if they were harboring fugitives. Beyond them being deserters - in her mind they were more like refugees seeking asylum than criminals when it came to that. She nodded slowly, hoping it would be enough to make Tavros continue. The space between his words extended, and Jade quickly thought about how to get more information, without seeming rude.

Finally he spoke, in a long burst. “And then one time Gamzee got really mad, and Eridan confronted him and said something really hurtful, I’m not going to repeat it because it’s not nice, but Gamzee hit him, and it broke his glasses by accident, and the glass went in his eye.”

Jade tried not to physically recoil, not to show her shock, nor how all of this was starting to make sense with Rose’s observations. She could understand anger management issues, but near murder or taking an eye was a little beyond that. She had to wonder how they were still friends, let alone in a relationship of any kind.

“Honestly, that’s kind of not abnormal for trolls,” Tavros said, inadvertently answering her question. “See, Vriska and Terezi and Aradia, they did worse to each other, and they actually meant it. But we wanted both Gamzee and Eridan to live, and on the ship there was nowhere to run, so Nepeta helped them. If Gamzee’s about to freak out Eridan can back her up and help us control him, and if he and Gamzee are about to start fighting she tells them to stop and they have to listen, and she and Eridan kind of used to annoy each other but now they’ve got Gamzee as a reason to work together. And I had a pale thing with Eridan at the time as well, because we both sort of understood some personal things we’d both been going through. It didn’t work out long-term, but we’re friends now. So we needed Nepeta because I didn’t want to take sides.”

Jade looked at the nervous troll in front of her, and wondered if she should ask if Gamzee had ever done anything to hurt him. Gamzee had seemed sincere when he’d declared his love, or rather his pity, but if he was that messed-up in the head, that wasn’t a guarantee of Tavros’ safety. Tavros had to have seen the marks on Gamzee’s arm. Did he think he could change him, or that he already had changed?

“How do you feel about…” She started out strong, but she couldn’t bring it up. How did you even ask a question like that?

“How do I feel about what?”

“Oh, sorry I lost my train of thought… Well, is he calmer now so Eridan and Nepeta aren’t working overtime?”

“He likes you humans. It’s helped him calm down, I think a change of scenery was good for him. I mean he was okay on Alternia, and he sort of exploded on the tugship, but since we’ve gotten here he’s been a lot calmer.” Tavros stared into space, and murmured “I kind of get why. Trolls weren’t
meant to be caged.”

Jade tried not to let herself frown. Why did he like the humans? Were humans easier prey? Maybe ones who wouldn’t know his crimes, and he could get away with it. It wouldn’t surprise her if he could be pretty good at acting. “Good, good. I’m glad he’s not taking eyes anymore.”

“He didn’t mean to,” Tavros mumbled. “He just loses himself to highblood rage. It’s actually a phenomena on Alternia. It’s a subjugglator’s battle rage. They’re bred to have it. It’s how they do what they do. But Gamzee’s doing pretty good with a moirail and his ausipicticeship. He hasn’t had any reason to rage or, uhh, fight.”

“Okay, that’s good, I guess…” Jade chewed her lip again, and sighed. “If you have any problems with your thing with him, or if any of your friends are in trouble, you know you can come to me, right? That’s what moirlairs are for, aren’t they?”

“I do, and of course I’ll come to you when I need help. The same applies to you. I’m, uhh, here for you no matter what.”

“Hey, Tavbro!” Gamzee appeared between two trees, waving. “Hi, human sis!”

“Oh, hey!” Tavros stood up and extended a hand. They brushed fingers; Gamzee was avoiding body contact again. Gamzee smiled a little, and bent down to pet Bec. Unfortunately, the dog sensed Jade’s sudden nervousness and backed up, hackles rising and a growl emerging. Gamzee moved his hand away, looking hurt. “What’s with your not-lusus? He was fine with me last week and now he’s gettin’ motherfucking weird all sudden-like.”

“I… don’t know,” Jade lied, feeling bad for doing so in front of Tavros. She’d only just finished promising him that she’d be honest in all things with him. She decaptchalogue some candy, hoping to redirect the conversation. “Want some candy? I know you guys like Lawbreakers!”

Tavros blinked. “Don’t you mean Jawbreakers?”

“Um, yes. Sorry, slip of the tongue.”
Nepeta was used to the nearly-silent waiting around Equius’ cocoon, and it left her plenty of time to nap, sharpen her claws, and think. She had ventured along memory lane, she went back to when she met Equius and everything that lead them all to this point. She had thought and analyzed plenty. She was at the point where she just wanted Equius out of the cocoon.

She had settled for another nap, and it was a slight crack that woke her up. She growled and immediately jumped to action, ready to defend the cocoon from predators; of course she remembered shortly thereafter she was inside a house on a planet light years removed from Alternia. She still looked around the room, inspecting it for anything or anyone. Finding nothing, she was about to settle again when another crack echoed around the room, she looked again, and saw the splinter in the hard shell.

She went over to it, and tried to keep her mewls of joy to herself, waiting impatiently by the splinter in the hardened silk. She could feel herself wanting to bob and jump from foot to foot in excitement.

It seemed to take hours, hours upon hours for the cocoon to split up enough that Equius’ hand could come out and begin to pull, or more accurately shatter, the shell apart. Nepeta didn’t make a peep, she just let her moiiral pull himself out, though she could already tell Equius had pupated quite well; he looked far more like an adult and that was just from the bit of forearm and hand she saw.

The final piece holding the cocoon together shattered under his grip and he was able to pull himself out, his body matted in the remains of the protein slime that was stored inside, and he looked a bit disheveled and sticky, but Nepeta paid it no mind. All of them were together again, and the fact that Equius came out of the cocoon no worse for wear, unlike Tavros. (While it had been a blessing with regards to his paralysis that he could now fly, it was also a big target that basically screamed ‘cull me!’)

Equius still looked a bit out of it, but he looked up at her and smiled. A smile that she returned without one thought. After all the bad that had happened and would happened, they had now, and Nepeta was damn fine with that.

Equius moved slowly, sluggish with his new size and weight, but he looked over his hands and his arms, just a passing glance. His voice was hoarse. "I've missed you, Nepeta."

She would have hugged him, but she was pretty sure she'd get yelled at by him since he was filthy and he would make her dirty, so she refrained. "Missed you."
Equius looked over the room and over to his cocoon, his eyes still slightly unfocused. It was like waking up from a long nap. Nepeta knew it would take him a while to be fully functional. Nepeta looked over him, and felt a little more hope for their fight. Honestly Gamzee pupating would be wonderful too, given the size advantage and the strength of his psychics would improve. She had a dose of his psychics as they stood and she couldn’t imagine them any stronger. But they would get there. Though she wouldn’t discount their luck here. Their team was far more complete and not to mention stronger with Equius being his adult size. She tried not to giggle and watched him slowly gain control and fully awareness of his surroundings.

"Nepeta..."

"Yeah, meowrail?" He had a little smile, but pointed to his cocoon trying to look serious.

"What's that?"

"Well Gamzee and Eridan kept me company on my vigil... and well, they asked if they could... I didn't see the harm... They weren't... you know, attacking."

He huffed and turned to her, a bit of anger in his eyes. “You let them do what?” He said indignantly with rage following close by, but he didn’t look highblood raging.

“Come on, Equius, we haven’t seen each other in weeks, let’s not start your adult life on a fight!”

“I cannot believe you let those degenerates draw all over my cocoon!”

“Well, Dave said it’s tradition to draw on plaster casts if a human has a broken limb, he thought it’d be nice to share some Earth traditions with you, and everyone else joined in...”

Equius squinted. “Is this one supposed to be a picture of me?”

“That one was Eridan’s. I know I should have stopped him, but he and Gamzee were so happy drawing together, I didn’t want to break it up!”
“You’d think a seadweller would at least know that sharks aren’t anatomically capable of doing that...”

“I think that’s artistic licence... Look at this way, it’s enemyly teasing. They don’t mean any harm by it. They still have to pupate, so you can get them back when they do!”

“Still, you let them draw on my cocoon while I was unable to stop them. You should have been making sure something like that didn’t happen.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s not like they were attacking you. They are harmless little drawings. You can always get back at them. How about this...” Equius looked down at Nepeta, and waited for her to continue her sentence. When it didn’t come he raised an eyebrow.

“What?” He missed Nepeta squaring her shoulders and wiggling the slightest amount. Before, she leapt up and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him into a tight hug. He couldn’t help the smile, nor the fact that any anger he had about the event dissipated.

“I missed you so much!”

“I missed you too, Nepeta.” He patted her gently on the back. “You are right, I would quite enjoy a shower and a meal... How long was I out for?”

“Not too long, the fleet’s still on the way. It felt like forever though.”

There was a knock at the basement door. “Hey, guys, do you want some more time alone?” came John’s voice. “I made carrot cake, it’s ready when you are!”

Nepeta hastily handed over a towel, which Equius wrapped around his waist. “Yes, you can come in.”

The door opened and Jade and John appeared. “Hey, good morn-EEK!”

“What?”
“You’re... it’s. oh my god.” John tried to speak, but the words got lost as he looked over Equius.

“What?” This time Equius sounded a bit more panicked. He lifted his hands quickly and looked at them. His gaze traveled up both his arms.

“Equius, you’re...” Jade tried. “It’s that you--”

“Did something go wrong? Oh god, am I a mutant?” Equius was quickly looking over himself. Nepeta was looking between the humans and Equius. “I don’t see anything, Nepeta?”

She shook her head. “You look normal to me. It’s not like Tavros and his sudden wings. Maybe the humans can see something?” She shrugged, trying to find what they were freaking out about. She moved over to where both of them were standing and squinted, looking for any type of defect.

Jade and John looked at each other, trying to stifle their sudden freak out. “You’re huge.” Jade finally managed. Equius raised an eyebrow, then couldn’t help a little smile. He brought a hand up to his hair, feeling a blush already coming on.

“All your teeth are back!” Nepeta pointed towards his mouth.

“Really?” He ran his tongue along them proudly; it had been quite some time since he had all his teeth. “Thank you for your kind words, humans. I must say though, I am quite average for a blueblood. Not very tall nor very short, just exceptionally normal.”

“Okay, so being seven feet tall and consisting mostly of fangs is normal for an adult troll?”

“Yes.”

“And you said Gamzee’s blood colour gets even bigger?”

“Oh yes, much bigger. Actually, don’t tell him I told you, but Makara is abnormally short.”
“Can I go and hide under my bed for a while now?”

“Makara likely won’t pupate before the fleet arrives. If he gets close I don’t doubt he’ll put it off much like I did. None of us need to be caught pupating when they arrive. Don’t worry so much, I’m the same troll, just bigger. I still mean you no harm, unless you start it.”

“Christ, how big can trolls get?”

“Ten-ish feet,” Nepeta said. “Or as short as me. I’m really small for my blood color. But I think it makes me a better hunter. I hide better being smaller.”

“Oh god, ten feet of troll. All fangs, claws, and fight...” John groaned.

“Those that are around that height tend to come with a little more, and ten feet is on the freakishly tall side, much like Nepeta is on the adorably but uncommonly short side. But it’s not that it matters. We promise you, humans, we will find a way to cope. Meanwhile, it’s surprisingly good to see you again. I apologise for my absence. I would like a report, or an update of events that I missed. I assume the fleet isn’t too close. But first, I would like to get cleaned, and something to eat. Did you say something about carrot cake?”

John went to retrieve the cake, promising a much better meal later, and Equius thanked him, remaining in the basement to clean himself up. Jade and John had a whispered conversation as they were heading toward the kitchen, bumping into Rose on the way. “... I think we need to plan before things get worse - oh, Rose, please get Dave and meet us in his room, so we can have a little chat about a few things. Just make it quiet.” Rose did little more than nod, and walked off towards her room. Jade waited until she watched John come out of the kitchen and gave him a little nod, just so he knew the meeting was on. He returned it, and carried on walking downstairs.

Jade decided she felt a bit like some super secret spy in some cheesy novel, and here she was organizing a meeting of all the undercover agents. As she headed towards Dave’s room she thought about all the secret glances and hushed and hissed conversations from the trolls. Other than her natural curiosity she wondered even more so about what they talked about. If it was the best time to ambush them, or the story for their set of lies. Or maybe they were just talking about something benign like “I like human apples better than troll apples.” She had an overactive imagination, she assumed, and she couldn’t just see the negatives. She had to see some type of positive or this worry was going to eat her alive. There was still a chance that all of them were off-base. But after that video and looking at how they interacted, plus her conversation with Tavros... She shook her head and knocked on the door.
“Jade?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Come on in.”

Dave was sitting on his bed with a magazine, and Rose was sitting beside him looking over it with him, though it didn’t seem like either of them were really reading it. Jade jabbed her thumb towards the door. “John will be up in a minute. Equius is out of his cocoon.. And he’s huge.”

“How huge?”

“Huge, like seven to nine feet of huge, like he’ll have to duck coming through doors…. I’m worried. I had this conversation with Tavros too… But I’ll cover that when John gets in here. And we came up with an idea, maybe it will give us some answers. And it’s inconspicuous. What we think we should do is expose the trolls to… relevant… material - no, nothing really bad, just stuff which mentions things like, you know, that. And we see how they react. If it makes them act any more strangely than usual, we’ll have to confront them.”
Chapter 47

The trolls had just settled down to rest; they were training to near exhaustion, and when they were too sore to carry on they’d take a break to eat and watch movies or television with the humans. They were all curled up when a beeping made all of them look up for the offending noise that was bothering their sleep, they didn’t get enough as it was.

“It’th my computer, thorry.” Sollux reached over and grabbed it, wondering who the hell might be messaging him. He opened it up and quickly got himself into the system.

>ii h_ope th_ii2 ii2 th_e l_iittle c_aptor.
>iiif n_ot ii ap_ologii2e.
>helm2man? ii diiddn’t realii2e you could 2end outgoi2e me22age2.
>y_e2, iit’s me.
>ii d_iid a b_iit of h_ackiing. 2h_e’2 b_een b_u2y 2_o ii’v_e h_ad t_iime
>h_ow h_ave y_ou b_een?
>alright. we’ve been tra2niing non2top. don’t worry, ii remember my promii2e two you. ii won’t let my2elf get caught, we have a back up plan. iit’s ju2t 2ort of tiime two fight. two wiin or lose.
>ii w_ould l_iike it v_ery m_uh iiif y_ou w_on. b_ut ii am al2_o h_appy y_ou h_ave a b_ack up pl_an.
>n_ot th_at ii w_ant y_ou tw_o h_ave tw_o d_o iiit.
>ii’m stiill pretty damn 2urprii2ed two hear from you. though ii kiind of liike iiit.
>not iin a fucked up and mean way but you’re kiind of cool.
>that’2 why ii liike talkiing two you.
>th_ank y_ou.
>as h_appy as ii am tw_o 2p_eak tw_o y_ou
>ii c_ome w_iith 2_ome v_ery b_ad n_ew2.
>w_e j_u2t br_eached th_e b_oundariie2 of th_e 2_olar 2yst_em y_ou’re iin.
>what already?
>FUCK
>r_elax, l_iittle 2_ollux.
>iiit’2 g_oing tw_o be alr_iight. ii am g_oing tw_o 2_end ov_er th_e iiinf ormation ii h_ave.
>w_e w_ould h_ave arr_iived 2_oneer, b_ut ii 2ort of h_acked intw_o th_e oth_er h_elm2men and
fucked up th_eir pr_o gram. my own tw_o. ii w_a2 w_orth ii.

>how long do you think we have?

>ii mean before full on iinvasiion mode, and we have two actually face all of them?

>a m_onth, m_aybe tw_o

>ii c_an d_o my b_est tw_o f_or2tall th_em, b_ut ii w_on’t be m_uch tiime ii c_an cr_eate for you.

>don’t get your2elf two hurt over ii, we know, which ii2 more than iiif ii hadn’t deiiided two talk two you.

>at th_ii2 p_oiint y_ou ar_e th_e f_ir2t l_egiitiimate h_ope ii’ve h_ad ii in c_enturii2. ii’m w_illiing tw_o g_o all iin.

>ii’ll k_eep you a2 p_o2ted as ii c_an. Th_e m_ore kn_owledge y_ou h_ave th_e b_etter.

>thank you. 2hii you’re bada22, okay, ii 2hould go ii have two tell my crew that we need to up the pace. fuck. fuck. FUCK.

>h_u2h, l_iittle c_aptor.

>d_on’t r uiin y_our l_a2t m_oment2 f_or r_ebellion al_one. enj_oy l_iife 2_ome and 2l_eep oft_en.

>y_ou’ll n_eed all th_e en_ergy y_ou c_an h_ave.

>t_ake iit fr_om a f_aiiled r_evolutiionary. Eat w_ell, sl_eep oft_en, enj_oy l_iife. Th_e b_attle w_iill c_ome n_o m_atter wh_at.

>thank you again, ii’ll pa22 the adviice on. by the way, ii don’t thiink you faiiiled. you’ve helped ii2 more than mo2t would. thank you, ii need to go tell my crew.

Sollux turned away from his computer, looking to all the members of their tiny rebellion, all of them asleep or almost there. Nepeta was laying on Equius’ chest, curled up, and Sollux was pretty sure she’d be purring if it wasn’t for the fact she was sound asleep. Equius wasn’t much better, lying on the hard floor with one arm covering his eyes and the other probably was at some point wrapped around Nepeta’s body but since sleep came it fell to the ground. Feferi and Eridan were somewhere in a tub, probably sleeping fairly soundly, their bodies recharging and trying to heal from all the strain they were putting them under. He could imagine how creepy it was to see them fully submerged in water and their gills flexing with every breath. Despite the oddness it was peaceful. Aradia was curled up on Sollux and her shared pillows, wrapped up in their blankets, and on most nights Sollux would complain about having to pull them away from her and use some of them. He wished they could share a recuperacoon, at least once, like trolls were supposed to… Vriska was laying on Kanaya’s stomach, no doubt there had been a conversation going on, considering Tavros was close by. Vriska and Kanaya looked comfortable enough, but Tavros looked like he couldn’t easily lay on his side with the way his wings rustled in his sleep, and there was no doubt he was asleep, soft snoring gave that away. Terezi was curled up by the center of the room, looking like she had tried to stay awake for Sollux’s conversation to finish. The yellowblood didn’t expect any of them to function as well as he did on little sleep. Sollux lifted his gaze a bit higher and could see Karkat sprawled out on the plush pile, next to him it seemed even Gamzee was asleep, face down and clutching onto one of the plushes.

Sollux wasn’t one for sudden and strong emotional outbursts, not like this, but he just wanted to cry. He didn’t want to wake everyone up and tell them. They found some kind of peace, all of them had, and once again it was going to be ripped out from underneath them. It both pissed him off and
depressed him. He had to steel his nerves and wake everyone up. Luckily humans slept pretty damn soundly or they might have had to tell them. First thing was first to sneak in and gather the seadwellers; this was a red alert, and he was the messenger. He moved as quickly as his tired muscles would let him, moving up the stairs and through the hallways until he was outside Rose’s door. No doubt the humans were asleep, and he tried to figure out the quickest way to wake Feferi up without disturbing the human. He would have flown because that would have covered the sound of footsteps, but the light would be enough to betray him. Instead his steps were measured along the carpet, slow and steady and one soft step at a time; slow going, and it left him with way too much time to think.

When they came, would there be some declaration? Some official manifesto of their actions against the “Cult of the Sufferer”? Would they be more focused then the statements the fleet had actually put out? They knew at least two of the trolls who were coming. But what factions would get behind them? Sollux hadn’t the heart to tell Gamzee he was considered protege to the Highblood still, so no doubt the subjug forces would come raining down on them. But would they send in all types of factions? Or just a few choice agents?

His head was buzzing by the time he opened the door to the bathroom. He had a hard enough time with all of this without the list of unanswerable questions. He supposed he could harass the Helmsman for more information, but he’d put the poor troll in too much risk already. Sollux couldn’t abide by randomly torturing some troll for the sake of his life, or his comfort. By the time he knelt beside Feferi’s bathtub, he felt like a useless shitstain who really had no business still being involved in this when so many good trolls had already died.

“FF, you gotta wake up,” It took more than that a slight touch on the shoulder, and the bathtub’s wave from her motion almost fell on him. “Juth me, we have a problem. Downtfairth, I’ll eehplain. Juth need to get ED.” Sollux knew Feferi knew the disjoined short sentences meant Sollux had his mind scattered to the four winds, and wouldn’t be getting back together until the mood passed. That was the thing with fugue states, he supposed. She spoke, but it was affirmation and it was all he needed. As silently as he entered he left, and made his way to John’s room, and crept back to get Eridan. It was easier to rouse him, though there almost was another shot from that stupidly overpowered gun that Eridan had no business sleeping with, but Sollux supposed it was what brought him comfort. Eridan dressed while Sollux waited in the hall.

He should tell the humans. He should mention that all of them could soon be dead. That their planet was going to be enslaved. That this was going to be the shittiest month ever, assuming the fleet didn’t take a little side trip to look at the sights. It wasn’t like their captives were going anywhere, and honestly it was even more suicidal to go confront the fleet in space. At least with solid rock under their feet they could funnel and work the land to their advantage. But he should tell them, he should mention it. He could just imagine their stress levels, but Sollux knew what stopped him. It was the same thing all of them worried about. Gamzee.

Sollux knew he only had spare details of what had happened in conscription, the wounds had been grisly enough that it left little to the imagination about how cruel it was. But Sollux, even with the headache, had seen how Gamzee reacted to a voice. That was it, low frequency sound waves transmitted back to Alternia. Gamzee had almost collapsed and just froze right there. That wasn’t a fear he took mildly. Sollux had his ups and downs, but had only flirted with catatonia once, and it was after Aradia had been injured. He knew the signs and the symptoms, and Gamzee upon hearing this news might mentally vanish. He didn’t want to have to break this news to the humans when Gamzee was that way. Despite their lack of closeness, and the purplebloods general detestable demeanor, Gamzee would feel horrible, and the humans seeing that would make it worse. They might not get him back before the fight, in which case they might as well just deliver him back to his horrors and call it done. All Gamzee would be missing at that point was the bow, and some
sickeningly cheerful card. Sollux snorted in disgust at himself.

That brought him to problem number two (all good things and bad things come in twos, he supposed); Feferi. Her stress levels had been through the roof. Even with all the training, all the planning, all the other things they had done to make this better, fairer and a much more honest fight, they couldn’t predict what the Empress would do. Of course, that was a contingency they had done their best to prepare for. Feferi hearing this news was like someone putting up a comlink announcement of a troll’s death date a month in advance, and Sollux was the lucky troll who got to publish it. She’d no doubt take it with calm, collectedness, but he knew better. He knew that the stress of this could weaken her before the Empress was even within viewing distance from a telescope. If they lost her the group would splinter and fail. This next month was going to be volatile and horrible.

Of course, Feferi had time to know this was coming, she had begun to accept the consequences. They all could die, or most of them. It was a sacrifice all of them were willing to make. Despite all his protests, mental and the short physical one where he thought briefly about shocking himself into a coma, he opened the basement door, and proceeded to wake everyone up. Groggy eyes glared and set on him, with the kind of look that said “this better be the most fucking important announcement of your life, Sollux Captor, or the Empress and her goons won’t have a crack at you”. He found himself smiling grimly at that. Won’t have a crack at your legs and arms, to fit you for your brand new helmsman position. He sighed as he looked over them.

“They’re in the boundarieth of the thythtem. We have about a month until they arrive. Maybe more, maybe leth, depending on their planth. But figure we have a month until we fight, win or die.”

It wasn’t his most graceful speech, in fact he never wished more that he could go back in time and redo it. Make it heroic or inspiring or something, but that was fucking stupid. Instead he looked at all their now-awake faces, and tried to look like he didn’t see death looming over their shoulders. Just waiting to take them. Shit, maybe he did, he could imagine a cruel and terrible smirk from the bitch they called death and he cursed her. Maybe she could take a vacation, that would be great. Hard work being death and all.

Karkat stopped his thoughts, and he’d thank Karkat for it if he wanted the endless stream of gloating bullshit from the smaller troll. “Alright, everyone, full night’s sleep tonight, we kick it into high gear tomorrow. Sollux, in the morning I need you to take over some of the human satellites and track their movement. Vriska, you’re in charge of Feferi’s training, be as big of a bitch as you want, just no massive injuries.”

“And the humans?” Kanaya asked.

“We’ll tell them when we have a better time table. It’s not typically something their species has to deal with. A nice fairly concrete estimate of arrival will both ease their worry and make it worse, but it’s not a constant threat every day for the next month. Now everyone is sleeping. A full night’s sleep. I know that all of you are worried, but if you don’t sleep your mind gets dull, and most of you are fucking stupid enough as is. Now, ‘coon time, everyone.”

No one argued, no one said anything different. They just all exchanged looks, in some weird form of troll compassion for each other, went to their respective beds, and went to try to sleep. Sollux wrote a sign, in his best human handwriting. “Slepeng, pleze doo nawt desterb.” He didn’t even care if the humans would mock him in the morning. Their language had the dumbest spelling he had ever encountered, and he was sure they’d get the message.

Sollux pulled Aradia to him, curling his arms around her and holding her close. He just really wished that they could have at least shared a recuperacoon once. It wasn’t much of a demand, but it was his.
>thank you again, ii’ll pa22 the adviice on. by the way, ii don’t thiiink you faiiled. you’ve helped u2 more than mo2t would. thank you, ii need to go tell my crew.

>_trollian connection lost.

>_ reengage connection? y/n

>_l_iitle c_aptor?

>_invalid command.

>_reengage connection? y/n

>_l_iitle 2_ollux?

>_ invalid command

>_ reengage connection? y/n

>_y_our anc_estor, h_e w_ould b_e pr_oud of y_ou.

>_ invalid command

>_ reengage connection? y/n

>_l_iittle 2ollux

>_my 2ollux.

>_plea2e

>_ invalid command

>_ reengage connection? y/n

>_don’t die

>_2ollux

>_ invalid command

>_ reengage connection? y/n

>_ii’m proud of you.

>_and ii don’t under2tand but ii

>_ invalid command

>_ reengage connection? y/n

>_ii think ii’ll diie iif you don’t win or iiif you diie here.

>_ invalid command
> reengage connection? y/n

>2ign wa2 right, there ii2 love iin trolls, deep love for their fellow troll, cariing, compa22iion, and
ii want you two know that ii care about you, that ii’m proud of you. ii love you the way ro2a loved
hiim. do what we couldn’t, kiid.

> invalid command

> reengage connection? y/n

>riight riight you piiece of 2hiit but ii want him two read thii2 eventually.

> invalid command

> reengage connection? y/n

>2ollux, ii am 2orry ii lied, but ii diidn’t want you two know that ii was me. that ii was your
ance2tor, but wiith the end 2o clo2e let me tell you that ii do care, and ii do love talking two you. ii
am proud of you no matter the outcome. ii couldn’t have wi2hed for a better de2cendant.

> invalid command

> reengage connection? y/n

>alright, ii should go back to the una22umiing helm2man now. but ii ju2t wanted you two know.
2tay 2trong, liittle perfect one, my 2ollux.

> invalid command

> reengage connection? y/n

> N
“Hey, guys, I found it!” Dave jumped the handrail of the stairs and landed lightly, waving a DVD. The trolls were gathered, but oddly silent. Plus, Dave was sure this reconnoissance would be good.’

“Found what?” Terezi asked, sniffing. “Ooh, something red! Okay, this is going to be good.”

“Oh yeah, it’s only a movie with all the fucking red. All of it.” Dave flipped Vriska a quick thumbs-up as Terezi squealed.

“So, other than it having red, what’s this one about? Since your human movie titles tend to leave a lot to the imagination.” Karkat said, looking towards the case in Dave’s hand, but he was too far away to even glance at the title.

“So I have to do it in Troll-Movie-Title fashion, or will a summary be alright? No offense but your titles are pretty much stupid. I mean if you want to go to a movie with your friends. you’re sitting there chillin’ in your hive, and you call them up and say ‘yo, you busy.’ they’re like ‘nah, you want to do something?’, you’re like ‘yeah, how about a movie?’ ‘sounds great, what’s playing?’, and I’m pretty sure the sun will have risen by the time you’ve said one of their names.”

“Movies are released two at a time. Two per month, if there are a lot of movies coming out. If not, it’s still only two. We tend to shorten it to a genre. Like: action, drama, myth, epic, etc. We use that a lot to. In that case you’d say... Actually, Sollux?”

“What?”

“If I asked if you wanted to see a movie with me what would you say?” Karkat said.

“I’d say ‘Pleathe, not another thtupid romcom’.”

“Pretend one isn’t out.”

“That’th the only time you ever athked to thee a movie. But fine, I’d thay thomething like: there are two out, an acthion film or a devothional. If KK,didn’t know what either of them were about I could go a bit into the actorth, or thome of the plot. Thortening them down with the et cetera.”

“Okay, that was a way too long of an explanation for my rambling. I really didn’t care how y’all asked each other on dates. Oh wait. I forgot, trolls don’t quite understand humans being sarcastic.”

“I’m going to skip over the implication that we only go to movies as some sort of sick mating dance like you humans and instead once again repeat myself, so the question can be answered. What are you going to force us to watch this time?”

Terezi took the DVD case and licked the title, leaving teal smears over it. “‘Repo: The Genetic Opera’?” She slapped it back into Dave’s hand. He held it between finger and thumb, pulling a face.

“Or, to give a truncated troll title; ‘Wherein A Bunch Of People Die Horribly To A Rockin’ Soundtrack’,” Dave said. “Anyone got a tissue?”

“Horrible deaths sound fun,” Vriska piped up, untangling her claws from her attempt at knitting. “Certainly more fun than this.”
“We’ve told you, Vriska, it takes patience to learn,” said Rose, as she picked up the ball of wool and started re-rolling as much as possible.

“It’s stupid,” Vriska said, glaring at the yarn as if it personally offended her.

“Things aren’t stupid just because you can’t do them. It takes patience, and when a new talent is learned it’s definitely far more rewarding. Your hard work has paid off.”

Vriska rolled her eye. “That sounds like a stupid wiggler’s book story, and I’m inclined to think it’s even dumber now. Well, Dave, what are you waiting for? Put in this movie.”

“Allright, but first, you can’t miss anything. The story isn’t uber complex or anything but it’s better if you see it all, okay? So go get drinks and snacks now. I’m going to make sure this shit’s on surround sound so your spongeclots or whatever the fuck you call your ears can be bathed in the righteousness of this movie. Also, get comfy, this movie is wicked like Witch of the West level, needing some oil to come clean.”

The trolls nodded and a few got up, grabbing whatever they may need during the movie. John went and procured a few pillows so the trolls could more comfortably sit on the floor and not be hassled with moving so much. When the trolls got back, Dave turned on the TV and all of them were left looking at the DVD menu. “Am I allowed to click off the lights, humans?” Dave asked, hoping that if someone was too nervous they could come up with a viable reason.

“I don’t see why not. I can knit in the dark,” Rose said with a slight nod, and glance to John and Jade, who were close enough to each other it forestalled any wandering hands. Someone would call the perpetrator on it.

“Awesome, helps the trolls see or smell better.” Dave nodded at Terezi, before clicking off the lights and getting comfortable himself. He pressed play, and he couldn’t help the smile as the movie started. He pretended to look towards the screen, but couldn’t help but watch the trolls’ reactions. All of them were always so excited, but they always got weird when they watched movies. Weird in a good way, usually.

They flashed through the back story. Dave had to wonder if the trolls had anything like opera, or if this was going to be a completely new experience for them. He had heard the crickets-being-crushed-by-nails-on-a-chalkboard that the trolls considered music, he couldn’t imagine a troll musical.

The trolls seemed capable enough of following along; when the first song started they looked a bit confused, but seemed to roll with it anyway, learning about the main ‘bad guy’, and following along with as much ease as language and cultural barriers allowed them. They said nothing, though Dave noticed that Terezi seemed to perk up at the threat of ridiculous violence. Dave was sure Rose would have something to say on the subject, but all Dave could decide was that the trolls were so use to violence that if it wasn’t a prominent feature movies and TV weren’t as interesting. Either that or Terezi moved forward because of the blood.

There was general silence, Rose was glancing around at the trolls, though there was nothing that seemed odd insofar but she hadn’t exactly expected that. Repo! was merely an intro to the terrible horror and painful thriller movie spree they were going to go on. Hopefully the campy nature and violence interested the trolls enough that one of them could suggest a much more relevant film.

When the doctor was shot it got a little giggle from the trolls. “Fuck your bad newws.”

“Aw, Eridan, it’s a human Highblood.” Vriska glanced over to Eridan. The song interrupted any more conversation; Rose knew that it required some concentration for the trolls to make contextual
sense of it. “Hey, Rose,” Vriska said softly. “Dumb question, but what’s a graveyard?”

“A graveyard is a place where human dead are buried, or otherwise entombed.” Rose said it loud enough for all the trolls to hear.

“Oh, okay, that’s weird… But I got it. Thanks.”

Rose made a mental note of the question, but figured it would go on the back burner for a while. Vriska opened her mouth again and Rose cut her off. “That’s a tomb, a special kind of grave, it’s a memorial to the dead.” Vriska nodded again.

“So if that guy is a highblood, she’s a midblood, and this dirty guy is a lowwblood.”

“You calling uth dirty?”

“No, just poor.” Eridan grimaced. “Your dead bodies are gross, wwhy is it still around? Yuck. Wwait, wwhy did that guy just scream?”

“Thitty low-oh-blood criminals.” Sollux tried to imitate Eridan’s voice. The trolls didn’t even flinch at the naked mass grave. Rose knew they were calm when it came to things like his, but not even a bat of eyelashes or a shudder, or anything. Pure acceptance. Conversation fell by the wayside as the plot slowly advanced.

“Is that dad locking his daughter up in a bedroom?”

“Yeah,” Jade said softly.

“Isn’t that creepy for your guys? I mean a lusus locking a troll up in their house would be weird,” Terezi tried to keep her voice down.

“Yes, but it’s supposedly valid because he’s a doctor and she’s sick,” Jade answered, her voice a bit louder. Rose tuned out the cultural difference and watched the rest of the group as the next plot-full song came on. Karkat seemed to perk up and was just watching this go by, though his slightly forward posture gave away his interest. He mumbled something after the song ended. Gamzee smiled, and whispered something back. No doubt they were speaking in Alternian, and Rose watched John mimic her own curse.

“Wwell, someone really misses their dead married person.”

“Wife,” Rose corrected him.

“Obsessed with dead wwife, locks kid in bedroom. Wwoww, wwhat a guy.” Eridan waved some odd gesture next to his head, which Rose assumed was the Alternian hand gesture for insane. She would have agreed but she didn’t want to spoil the movie.

The trolls’ comments went oddly quiet as the song continued, and it was revealed how truly insane Nathan was, which by all accounts was an important plot point; she didn’t blame them.

The tonal jump seemed to end the silence, or at least the non-reaction. The Largo kids got a little giggle, the trolls watching them just being pampered and spoiled brats. “Hey KK, how many kismetheth doeth thomeone need?”

“Maybe they all vacillate, but damn, I’m surprised no one’s pissed off about it.” John decided that they should really talk to the trolls about incest and why it was taboo later, because it needed to be said. By now Eridan was muffling his laughter with his hand. John guessed he’d ask later. The trolls
didn’t get the little bit of human humor, but instead seemed to be getting some of their own. John
really wondered what this movie looked like to them.

“That man is odd. And I’ll analyze him with the utmost scrutiny since he is supposed to be a
highblood,” Equius chimed in. “Then again, everyone in this movie is sort of odd or creepy.”

“He’s old hat, like seadweller nobility, the ones that haven’t died yet from the last age.” That made
Equius smile a bit, which Jade assumed was as close to laughter as Equius gave most times.

The story moved on, following Nathan’s rapid descent into insanity. Jade caught Gamzee’s glance
over at Karkat, but nothing more, nothing less. And she didn’t know what she expected, this wasn’t
in the level of his crimes.

Eridan’s voice wasn’t as loud when he spoke next. “See, Largo kids are highbloods. And this Mag
wwoman is trying to auspistice. Obviously it’s not a healthy relationship. Also, oldstyle lowwblood
slavery. See.”

“I’m glad you said he’s a seadweller,” Equius said. “Because I will not be a part of lowblood slavery
in any way shape or form.”

“The blueblood wwere though, even azurebloods—” Eridan just shook his head. “It’s a surprising
good allegory. Is that a dirty open air surgery booth? Gross hygiene, humans.”

“Well, if that’s all they have…” Equius gave a little laugh as Nathan and Shiloh began to talk about
something completely normal in the context. He glanced over at Nepeta, and both began laughing. It
seemed that they got the wordplay and it took sometime for them to stop their little fit of giggles.

The next song, which was one of the catchiest little earworms in the whole movie, seemed like
enough. Gamzee was looking at Karkat now, and the smaller troll offered his hand, and Gamzee
seemed to gladly take it. John couldn’t decide if it was because of the drug history or if it was
something to do with the prostitutes around, or Amber. He bet it was the drugs, but he was keeping
an open mind.

“Well,” Karkat said after the song ended. “There is not one healthy relationship in this whole movie.
The genetic matesprit want from Rotti to Shiloh, and Nathan is a terrible lusus. The Largo kids…
Then again this maybe-pale-maybe-red thing the guy has for Shiloh isn’t too bad. He’s not being
overwhelmingly terrible. Protecting her, keeping her safe, making sure her naivety doesn’t get her
killed. Nathan, you just missed your daughter getting her quadrant on. Good job, terrible lusus.”

The song changed, and a few of Luigi and Pavi’s comments got laughs. But as the tone descended
into the butcher room, things went still. The troll’s reactions to the chaos were a complicated bunch.
The humans missed Gamzee’s stiffened posture, him pulling back, and clutching on to Karkat’s
hand, but they didn’t miss Terezi’s comment. “Well, sounds like he remembers to me. Glad we’ve
got that covered.”

“What’s a gud-mum?” Vriska asked.

“God-mom. A non-blood relative, in this case a female, who is chosen to be involved in the child’s
life in lieu of the parent. Usually the mother asks a close family friend to take on the role.”

“Ah. Okay. Backup lusus.” Vriska shifted as the song continued, and Rose caught Aradia watching
the TV with rapt attention. It wasn’t hard to pick up when the trolls were engaged or interested in
what they were seeing. Kanaya was also very engaged in this scene, and there was a little glance at
Vriska from the jadeblooded troll. Vriska seemed to notice but she couldn’t return the look.
The movie was beginning to come apart, the major movements revealed, and the trolls stayed nearly silent as they watched it unfold. Amber’s freak out at her dad warranted a small laugh, though this time Rose didn’t miss Gamzee shifting away from the screen and him dropping his head, no longer looking at the screen, for what reason Rose couldn’t place.

Shiloh leaving, and the beginning of the end, spun them into near silence. They expected to be quiet the rest of the movie. Each troll seemed invested in one specific character, though who that was Rose wouldn’t ask. Asking who and why they identified with one of the actors was a sure way to make a red flag appear for the trolls.

“Wwell, humans seem to kind of know how old style highbloods act…”

“This is technically dystopian.”

“Wwell, that’s a bit extreme, but it’s actually pretty close to home.” Eridan looked down at his hands. Amber’s performance made any shame from Eridan fall away and instead there was laughter. Loud laughter. “Exactly, that’s wwhat I wwas sayin’.”

Mag’s performance was cheered by Aradia, and after Rotti cut the ropes, she growled. Rose at least didn’t have to ask when it applied to Aradia, she liked Mag. Aradia fell into a small burst of laughter. “She hit her dad-lusus with a shovel.” The trolls started laughing, though they seemed to understand that it wasn’t supposed to be funny to humans. They quickly got control of the laughter and followed along. Luigi cutting Nathan from behind made all of them stare at the TV as if it was directly responsible.

The trolls stayed quiet for the finale; the only reactions were unconscious as Rotti, Nathan, and Shiloh all battled it out in song. John could see the surprise on their face as Nathan confessed to his crimes. He watched Karkat, why he singled Karkat out John didn’t know, but he watched as the troll began to look concerned. The shock when Nathan was shot quickly turned into held back tears. Gamzee looked over to him and squeezed Karkat’s hand in a supportive sort of way. A quick glance over at the moirallegiance pairs saw them grabbing each others’ hands or exchanging a glance. Karkat was outright crying, though it was silent when Nathan finally died, and Gamzee held onto his hand as his own demeanor quickly turned into sadness, and some emotion John couldn’t place. Jade elbowed him, and pointed. John took a quick look around the trolls, as were the other humans; it seemed many of them were not as stone hearted as they tried to be. Following Shiloh’s song and her subsequent freedom, most seemed affected. They let the movie finish, the trolls regaining composure, and hiding any sad emotion. The movie ended with a little wet laugh from the trolls at Amber taking over GeneCo, and with that they had their first foray into this type of analysis, though it offered many more questions than answers.

After the movie the trolls tried to look like nothing had transpired; other than a few rogue wet lashes and the occasional sniffle that masked itself behind one of them clearing their throat it looked like nothing had happened. The trolls were silent for a moment, and then, as the humans’ luck would have it, Gamzee spoke up.

“Parts of that were bullshit.” He seemed truly flustered by that, or genuinely angry. The humans couldn’t exactly tell why, but it did seem like some of the trolls nodded along in agreement. “And I didn’t know you humans bled so much. I mean I knew we did. But that’s a lot of blood. Or maybe it looks like a lot because it’s all red, and I ain’t motherfuckin’ used to seeing it like that”

“The amount we bleed tends to be fictionalized in movies for dramatic effect.” Rose set her knitting to the side and turned on one of the side table lights.

“Too bad.” The thought seemed absent as if something in his head was churning. Rose knew
nothing directly pointed to his crimes, but instead it was just violent. She wondered why the introspection, unless something about the violence was familiar.

“Other than parts of it being bullshit,” Dave joined in to the conversation, “I hope my title was good enough for you.”

“It was, it had a lot of nummy red.”

Karkat looked around the group, then over to the clock, and back at the group. “Hey guys, we need to change and get our asses back to the grindstone. We’ve got training.” Something in all the trolls stiffened up, a few stares and a very curt nod from Equius was his response. “That was nice, thanks, humans.” His gratefulness seemed forced, but still somehow genuine.

The trolls packed up their bit of blankets and pillows, and the humans could hardly hear the whispered buzz of Alternian conversation as they finished getting everything put away. A second later they turned on the lights, said their good-nights and vanished down to the basement.

“Are we going to...?” John didn’t ask the full question.

“Yes,” Dave said. “If they catch us, we wanted to watch them train.” The group of humans waited a minute or so, before following the trolls down the stairs.

“GZ, you okay?” Through the door, they could hardly make out the words, but it did seem like English. Some English, anyway, they could hear the buzz of other conversations.

“Yeah.”

“You-” The next couple of words were lost to the language barrier. Why they were speaking a mixture of English and Alternian was beyond the humans. The next word after was blocked out by Terezi’s laughter.

The other three humans looked over to Jade, who frowned. “All I got was ‘off’…? I think. Like he seems off maybe?”

“Makes sense.” They hadn’t heard the trolls really speak much in Alternian, and it was a jarring experience. Things didn’t seem like words, just noises, but they could almost pinpoint each of the troll’s voices.

Jade was focusing on the words, the other humans felt like they almost had to hold their breath, hoping they could find something here. This wasn’t the first time they cursed the trolls for having another language, but it probably would have been the loudest.

“When…” Jade whispered. “‘When Eridan’… ‘on Mindscar’… That’s all I got. Like with Eridan on the ship.” The humans looked between themselves with a few raised eyebrows. “No, that’s Gamzee. Then Karkat, I think said something along the lines of ‘hour’… ‘bad’.”

“Hour bad?”

“Maybe that was was a horrible hour, the movie?” Rose offered, grasping at straws.

“Hold on. Eridan just asked something about Gamzee forcing, then top…”

“Really?” John looked at the door as if was going to affirm Jade’s translation.

“Nepeta said that thing affirming their relationship, and then something else. I think that’s Equius, he
just asked ‘all good?’"

The humans went quiet as they heard a growl; they could almost feel it, and they did feel the little bit of fear at what it might mean. It sent a little shiver down their spine, the kind that rippled through them. With a glance the humans tried to decide if they should go to their rooms.

“Gamzee’s talking really fast, and I’m not too sure what he’s saying. It sounds angry.”

“We got that, Jadykins.” Dave pressed the side of his face harder against the door, like it would help with the translation.

“He just said something, the word seems really familiar, like Eridan mentioned it to me, but just once. It wasn’t a word we practiced. He did that with harder words, but I can feel it on the tip of my tongue, and I know it’s not good.”

“Like rape?” John asked.

“They don’t have a word for rape, remember, dummy.” Dave poked John’s shoulder.

“No… Something else. Karkat just shooshed him.” The humans fear faded a little. “Terezi’s saying something about sheets, like of paper. ‘Kohalane’… I know that word too, not the translation though. ‘Blood’… ‘everything’. This sentence doesn’t make any sense. I wonder if some of it’s slang.”

“Sheets, blood, everything…” Rose repeated the words just under her breath.

“Okay hold on… ‘Need sheets, because’ that Co-ah-lane word. ‘Blood everything go’.”

“That made it maybe a little better,” Dave mumbled.

“You translate.” Jade shot him a glare. “‘Weapon’, this is Sollux talking. ‘We need weapons’… Karkat, ‘no… enough, can’t, we can’t… have’, maybe… ‘we can’t’ something, it’s the verb, ‘him’. Eridan’s talking… ‘His’, maybe Karkat’s, though the ending is weird. ‘His’…something, ‘not theirs’…their job maybe?”

“So, they need weapons. Karkat said they can’t fight him that way, maybe. And Eridan said it’s not their job to do that.” John tried to simplify.

“Yeah, then he mentioned Gamzee.” The humans shared one of those weighted looks. “‘Blood’ with a weird ending, this is Gamzee speaking. ‘Blood’ with a weird ending I haven’t heard, and then ‘blood’ with another prefix I haven’t heard.”

“Weird.” John looked towards the door, then pressed his ear against it again.

“The room just went silent. Like pin drop kind of silent. Feferi, she said that blood-with-a-prefix too. ‘Join’, ‘since’… ‘moha’. They just said the word, I think!” Jade tried her best to keep her voice down. “Gamzee just started laughing. It sounded disgusting. Like this dry, evil… listen… Oh God.”

--

The room was still silent, the trolls letting Gamzee finish his humorless laugh that all of them found creepy at one point; now they just understood it was something of a private joke between Gamzee and the darker recesses of his insanity since his return from SAIGE-40.

“You alright despite your ewil little laugh?” Eridan sighed. “You wwant it, don’t you? Rewenge and all.”
“I just need sleep,” Gamzee’s voice was distant in a way they all understood. “And I honestly don’t give two motherfucks.” It was obvious by his tone he did, but the presence of fear kept all of that in check.

“Well, Gamzee, both of us can battle our ancestors.” Feferi gave a kind of smile, trying to show support. “It’ll really shake up the power structure. Empress and her head general both dead.”

“If we can.” Sollux looked between them. “We need weaponth, and a foolproof plan. We don’t have either.”

“I’ll see what I can throw together with our limited supplies.” Equius looked down at the floor, then back up to the group. “Perhaps a few nights camping out in the woods creating a barrier, and some type of fortifications will help.”

“I like that plan,” Karkat said with a nod. “We’ll take some of our training time - not yours, Feferi - and scout the woods around the house to build barriers. Drone ships burn up in the atmosphere right?”

“All but the ones created for entry, and feww of them are on the ships. Only ones are for recon.”

“Alright, so it’s going to be a bloodfight. Troll against troll.”

“Great.” Gamzee’s voice was dull.

Karkat shifted closer to him and murmured “You okay?”

“Eh, that last song in the motherfuckin’ movie got to me a bit.” Gamzee laughed drily again. “Stupid. It’s just a movie, it don’t have to be realistic…”
“Trolls, would you come upstairs?” Rose shouted down the stairwell. It wouldn't take long for them to assemble and she was glad for it; nervousness had struck her to her core. As a group, they had decided to confront the trolls and get the truth out of them. All of them had churned over this investigation enough that it was starting to make it difficult to sleep.

If their accusations were correct, then they had a right to know, to not live in fear. Especially Rose, it wasn't fair to live like that in her own home. She rejoined the other three, all of them giving each other supportive glances, and they all had spoken about the most diplomatic way to confront this situation. The humans were nervous, they'd all admit, but doing their best to hide it. If the trolls suspected something they might get the upper hand, and they knew that they were no match for that storm. Rose looked towards the door, trying to understand the odds if something went awry and they had to fight. As the door opened, she wanted to damn the fact the trolls lived in a highly militarized society. It would have been pointless, but it might have helped ease her mind some.

“Ow!” Equius whacked his horn on the door frame again, knocking plaster dust from the surrounding wall. The humans didn’t laugh, if anything it sparked their nervousness even more. The trolls settled on the couches or the floor, as usual, and the humans remained standing, ready to run if necessary.

Karkat folded his arms. “Okay, we’ve gathered. What’s the problem? Anyway, we need to talk to you all… But you first.”

Rose took a deep breath. “There isn’t a problem, well, there is a problem. But that isn’t exactly the point of this conversation. I will admit you are in the right to not want to tell us certain things. For instance, that your race cannibalizes not only the grown but also the young. You could have kept that to yourselves. I would have understood that. But at the beginning I said I didn’t want anything dangerous in my house.” Rose wasn’t sure if this was going to go well, but all of them were prepared. They had the home field advantage.

“Other than the dangers you already know with harboring us, nothing’s changed.” Vriska said; she sounded bored.

“Recent evidence has come to light that would easily refute those claims,” Rose stated matter-of-factly. The humans looked between her and the trolls. All four of them were obviously nervous and the trolls seemed to slowly be picking up on it.

“And that would be...?” Terezi said, once the silence lingered on for too long.

Rose sighed. She hoped a call for honesty would get them talking, but if she had to be forward she would. “Okay, I shall just come out and say it. We know about Mister Makara. Specifically, we know what he did.”

Gamzee blinked. “Whuh? What did I do? Hey, if this is about the carpet I told you that’ll come right out...”

“Stop trying to be funny, you know what we mean,” John said sternly. He took a breath and looked at Eridan, unsure if he should ask him to leave or hug him or what. John’s dad was well-meaning but a bit old-fashioned, and while he had given John a talk on how best to help a rape survivor, just in case, the talk had mostly assumed the person in question would be female, prepubescent, or both. Not to mention human. Now it was presumably too late for medical attention to help, he wasn’t quite
“To be honest, I don’t know what you’re meaning. I didn’t do anything. I ain’t having the time to do anything that you humans would know anything about that would call for this sort of talk. But why don’t you get up and enlighten me to what it is I was doing, or am doing, or been done at doing?” Gamzee did sound honestly lost, but the humans understood well enough that humans with dangerous behavioural issues could come across as normal. No doubt trolls had something similar.

Rose stood defiant, crossing her arms.

“We’re not blind,” Rose said. “It would have been nice to know when we met, or perhaps a bit after.”

John looked back over to Eridan. The seadweller was looking between John and the other trolls, hurt, but the confusion was slowly draining out of his face. It was strange to watch the color drain; he looked almost lavender, before his skin went almost white. “No, no,” Eridan mumbled. “You don’t want to go here. Don’t do it.” His voice wasn’t too loud but John could make out the words. He’d have to look something up online later, he’d like to help Eridan. If that meant figuring out a complicated mess of emotions, he would do it.

“We can’t just ignore it!” Jade protested. “Someone might get hurt again. Okay, Tavros says he’s trying to get better, and I know Tavros wouldn’t lie to me, but...”

“Someone might get hurt again. Better yet,” Rose said, “we could have taken the necessary precautions to make sure it didn’t happen. I wasn’t lying when I said I keep myself protected when I sleep, but I wouldn’t allow anything to happen to my mother, our seemingly strained relationship or not.”

“What are you going on about?” Karkat asked slowly.

“Kar, you should go. Actually, we all should just go. It was dumb of us to stay. We need to leave before somethin’ bad happens.”

“Of course you’re running, when you’ve been found out.” Dave’s voice was low, threatening as a human could muster.

“Humans aren’t some idiot species you can hide things from.” Rose spoke slowly, stiffly. It sounded hollow in her ears. “I should have known that extraterrestrial life wouldn’t be this... okay without there being some bumps. If you tell us you don’t have to leave. We can perhaps work something out.”

Eridan stood, taking a few quick steps towards Rose. “You have no idea what you’re askin’. It--”

“He hurt you, how can you defend him? He took your eye, scarred your face, not to mention anything else he probably did to you.”

“I’m not defendin’ him!” Rose had seen a seadweller’s teeth before, but now they looked positively frightening. “I’m sayin’ that all of you don’t know where this path leads and you don’t want to find out.”

“Really.” Rose couldn’t hold in her laugh. “We just want to know about the criminals under our protection. So, we do want to go here, and we will. It’s been an elephant in the room for a while. I’d
“It’s not like we’re going to kick you out,” John said. “We just want to know the truth. If you tell us we’ll go from there, this isn’t a witch hunt. It’s just us asking for honesty.” John took another small step towards the troll, looking at Eridan as sort of a goal.

“Just tell us what really happened, and why you really left your planet, and why you really want to fight the Empire and we’ll be golden,” Dave said.

“A detailed list of all of your crimes would be good. Unless it really is just Gamzee,” Rose said. “In which case that’s another bridge we’ll cross when we get to it.”

“What are you even talking about? We told you the truth. Feferi has a deathmatch with the Empress, I’m a mutant, and neither of us want to die. So we ran off, the others came for a variety of reasons that they’ve told you as well. We’re deserters, that’s our crime, I don’t know what you want from us.”

“I admire your dedication to your lies, but we’ve seen... things that put holes in the ‘you’re only deserters’ as your crimes. How about the scarlet letter on his arm?” Rose said, pointing towards Gamzee. “We might not read your script but you’d be amazed at what we can figure out with the tools you’ve provided.”


“Gamzee!” Karkat said, turning to him. “Come on, let’s go.”

“No, you see, we’ve fed and sheltered you.” Dave extended his arm, symbolically blocking their path. “At the very least you can give us some honesty. Or is that too difficult? Not the Alternian way? Better to hide your shame and crimes in the dark then allow us to know what fucked-up kind of person you are? Pretty cowardly if you ask me.” Dave stood tall, stepping up for his cousin. All the trolls were looking at him. “Just tell us what kind of pathetic coward of a troll you--”

“SHUT UP!” The room fell silent. It was the first time any of them, human or troll, had heard Tavros shout. “Stop it! You don’t know what happened, you don’t know him, you can’t say things like that! I thought you were all really nice and I trusted you and now you’re hurting him and take it back!” Jade went towards him, when she got close enough, he shoved her away. “How could you, Jade? Why didn’t you just ask me what happened? I thought you trusted me...” He swallowed a sob, and finished with “I trusted you.”

“If I didn’t want my friend to be hated I’d lie on their behalf,” Jade said softly. “You don't have to be scared, this is a safe place.”

The look Tavros gave her was hard, cold, something Jade hadn’t thought he was capable of. “Obviously not. Nothing that happened would have made him hated. What’s your species saying... Let sleeping dogs lie?” Tavros was nearly growling. “Did you ever think we might not have mentioned it, because honestly it didn’t need to be brought up, unless he wanted it to be? Even more, maybe we didn’t bring it up because none of us wanted to know, but unfortunately we couldn’t miss it or forget it, and so we’re doing our best to help our friend.”

“Oh, Tavros, I’m sorry, but we just want to help you! Okay, I believe you when you say he’s okay with you. But what about Eridan? I thought Eridan was your friend.”

“That was an accident!” Eridan snapped, pointing at his eye. “Okay, yeah, he beat the shit out of me a feww times, but it wwas nofin I couldn’t handle... okay, it wwas, but wwe got it under control!
“Okay, so what did he do, then?”

“Nothing.”

The entire room fell silent at Equius’ simple statement. Gamzee looked the most stunned of all.

“But,” he said softly. “I am a criminal.. I mean, I should be... With what happened, and... I mean I-

“You did nothing. You were in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong troll. Not to mention you had your own idiocy working against you. You did nothing wrong. You are no more a criminal than Aradia is. Or Feferi. You are merely a troll who, like me, deserted his post in the Alternian military. And humans, you have no rights to any of the information on a troll’s past, at least not in this context. If you want it, ask for it, and see if you will be allowed it. You are not excluded from the proper way one obtains information, you are not above social grace.”

“Don’t you hate him? If you hate him why are you defending what he did? Wouldn’t you want him to come clean and tell us all of it? Is that what trolls do in hate?”

Equius frowned at Rose. “Of course I hate him, but what does that have to do with anything? He still did nothing wrong!”

“Okay, is this your freaky hatelove thing or just you being Lawful Neutral or something?” Dave asked, tilting his head.

"My quadrants are none of your business and I cannot possibly imagine a more inappropriate time for that kind of conversation anyway!" Equius groaned and massaged his temples. "Suffice it to say, I despise him, but that does not mean I will lie to you. He did not deserve his wounds and nor does he deserve your current treatment of him."

“If he did nothing wrong, and all of you are standing by that, why, then, does he have that mark on his arm announcing his crimes?” Rose said it briskly. Obviously beating around the bush wasn’t going to work anymore, she’d have to take a direct route.

“Do... Do you even know what that word means?” Vriska said, standing up, looking like she was preparing for battle.

John caught sight of Gamzee out of the corner of his eye. The troll had frozen, shocked, but his eyes were blazing. “We thought we did,” John murmured, but the trolls didn’t hear.

“Yes!” Jade burst out. “We saw it on that website! We saw the video with that highblood raping that poor girl! See, we know what he did to get those scars!”

Tavros and Kanaya moved to restrain Gamzee, but he was perfectly still; it was Karkat who leapt. Jade was slammed against the wall by the small but powerful troll, tears bursting from his eyes and his fangs bared.

"I think you deserve some scars of your own, you meddling little shits!"

Karkat’s claws dug into Jade’s shoulder; she winced and tried to contain her gasp of pain, while trying to wiggle out of his grasp. Terezi was the first one to be at Karkat’s side. She yanked on his shoulders, and most of her words were lost in the sudden chaos of the room, Rose, John, and Dave all moving towards their friend to pull Karkat, who was hissing and spitting out Alternian words at her, away.
“Karkat, stop.” Terezi spoke softly.

“If he hurts her,” John said, his voice as close to a growl as the trolls ever heard it, “there will be hell to pay.” John had one of his hands on Karkat’s, trying to pry his fingers away from Jade. Dave and Rose were setting up a perimeter so none of the other trolls would come and join the debacle that was occurring.

“Well, that tells us you did something too,” Rose hissed towards Karkat.

“Shush up, Miss Lavender, Karkat didn’t do anything. He’s just upset and defending his moirail,” Terezi said, still trying to pull Karkat away without his claws ripping into Jade.

“I can’t think of any reason a human or troll would knowingly be in a relationship with a monster,” Rose hissed at her.

“You take those words back!” Tavros said, doing his best to march over to the fray.

“Seriously, Tavros,” Dave said, rolling his eyes and making sure Tavros couldn’t get any closer. “You have to admit he is kind of a freaky space bug, who probably wants all of you dead. Monster’s not far off, I mean all that grim humor, love of blood, I’m sure he’d be fine stringing you all up and letting you die like hunted deer.”

“I won’t take back words unless I’m proven wrong.” Rose’s attention shifted to the amberblooded troll. “It seems my hunches were confirmed. I hate that I had to be right.”

There was a growl that echoed throughout the room. No one spoke and they looked towards the now-standing purpleblood. His usual hunched posture looked even more menacing now, and there seemed to be an aura of violence to him. They could feel themselves wanting to swallow but being unable.

He moved slowly, with purpose, long graceful steps, and they all could feel themselves pull back and away as he approached Karkat and pulled him off Jade. There was no gentleness; he yanked Karkat away, his claws tearing into her shirt and leaving little cuts on her arm.

The fear that had descended into them let up, though that aura of violence and hatred didn't leave. The trolls all stilled, unsure of what they should do. Stepping in now could get all of them killed, and doing nothing to protect the humans or themselves could do the same. But they were pretty sure the humans wouldn’t be able to handle the slightest bit of his rampaging.

“Calm the MOTHERFUCK DOWN.” Gamzee’s voice sounded weird, ominous. Shifting in volume and there was a growl that just laced under all his words. “If they want to learn about my scars, I’ll tell them.” His voice shifted to patronizing and spiteful fast enough to give the human's whiplash.

“Gamzee, they called you a monster.” Karkat’s voice was still a growl. “Just you keep your lookspheres on me, and I’ll show you every motherfucking thing.”

He stripped off the garment and dropped it, and Jade and John gasped as they saw the scars it had
concealed. He held out his arm and pointed to the offending word. His fingers moved along the carved letters, tracing them without looking.

“Do you know what this word means? I mean for sure.”

“We watched a video...” Jade said softly. “It showed a blueblood... and a maroonblood. He... She was saying no. That’s what it means, it means you’re a... rapist.”

Gamzee let out a humorless chuckle. “Ain’t that the most literal interpretation of this word ever.” He looked down at his arm. “In Alterian, the word is namoha.” Gamzee made sure to say it with his middle vocal chords so the humans could understand it. He lifted his arm and looked at it almost as if it was a picture handed to him by his child. Loving, accepting, but on top of the undercurrent of violence and fear it was making the humans feel sick.

“It don’t mean a troll who takes advantage of another. See, my soft fleshy friends...” The room turned bitter cold. Without warning, the lights seemed dimmer, the room acting like it was tilting. The humans thought they heard a voice in the distance shouting. The room’s sudden change in proportion was making them feel more than sick, vertigo mixed with stomach cramps. The longer the room distorted the more it felt like it was starting to spin like some fucked up carnival ride, and all of them really wanted to get off it.

Gamzee moved over towards Jade. “Come a bit closer. It’s hard to see unless you’re close. It’s hardly legible.” Jade backed away. “John, what about you? You thought it looked cool. No? How about you, Dave, you’re the one who wrote it for them weren’t you? Why are you backing away? It isn’t that scary. It’s just a scar. Guess that leaves brave little Rose, you want to see what this scar means? Come on, I just want to show you.”

There wasn’t a freak-out. Not one like any of the trolls had experienced. They knew that cold always came with Gamzee’s chucklevoodos. They knew that he was using them and it was distorting the room, but none of them could feel the stabbing pangs of fear; the humans seemed to be suffering their own fear, not some Gamzee was creating, or moving, or whatever the fuck it was that chucklevoodos did.

Rose made the mistake of trying to back away. Gamzee’s hand shot forward and grabbed hers, and pressed her palm against the scars on his arm, forcing her to feel the distorted flesh. “Shall I tell you what this really motherfucking means?” He dragged her hand over each letter in turn. “Namoha.” This time he pronounced it with the full range of sound, not the modified version. The word wasn't spat out quickly, but hissed and chattered, letting the humans catch every note. “‘One who is owned by a higher’.”

John swallowed hard. “Sh-shit, you were a slave? That’s what it means?”

“Not really. See, to be a slave on Alternia you have to have another troll’s sigil carved into you.” Gamzee wrenched Rose’s hand away and put it on the back of his neck. Rose shuddered. “Someplace where every troll can view their shame. Namoha just means I’m bound. This, or that for you, little Rose, that makes me a slave.” Rose’s eyes widened, the humans could see her hand moving along the back of his neck. Gamzee in turn released her hand and quickly relocated his so he could wrap his arms around her waist. Holding her close, that loving, but malicious look still in his eye. She tried to move in his grip, but every time she squirmed he tightened down his hold.

“That one’s a lot cleaner than the Namoha, see. I had to carve that myself, made a motherfucking choice, I did. I could carve it and serve, submit, be owned, in all ways. Or I would die, wouldn't keep me alive, and my hatchmates, all my friends, you know, they'd be next. They'd do the same thing to them. So I picked up the knife and carved it, I was shaking so bad, my wrist was broken.
Because I didn't do what he wanted...” The pause was brief, and Rose could see distance in his eyes for a brief second, his hand slid up her back, slowly, purposefully. Rose couldn't help but shudder. The look faded, and he stretched his neck. Rose, realizing where her hand was lingering, pulled it back before she had to feel the scar tissue anymore. She never knew keloids would make her feel so ill. “They carved their signs into me. Then again I didn’t fight it, I submitted to it. I was laying there...” His fingers grabbed onto her hips and spun her around so fast she was dizzy, it took time to make her vision stop swimming. His claws pressed against the back of her neck, his other arm holding her at the shoulders. “Hush, I’m not going to cut you. I was much like this, only I wasn’t struggling like you are. I gave into it. I let them label me. I didn’t have any other choice really.” His claws traced the design along Rose’s neck, but true to his words he didn’t cut into her. She watched Dave step forward, determination in his eyes, and she really didn't want him to do anything. He would be killed. Gamzee’s fingers weren’t just tracing now, they were caressing. Loving. Something that made sickness creep into her throat, and she couldn't swallow it down.

“Let me go.” Rose hissed between her clenched teeth.

“I thought you wanted to know what I motherfucking did?”

“Don’t! Don’t hurt her,” Vriska blurted out, trailing off as Gamzee looked at her. Rose wanted to feel relief, but she could hear the falter. This side of Gamzee, whether a part or the true whole, terrified the trolls.

Vriska had enough self control to not let her fear show, but she knew that look; it was the one right before he ripped off her robotic arm again. She clutched it tightly, as if it would matter.

“I’m not gonna hurt her,” Gamzee crooned, claw running through Rose’s hair. “Actually, I think it’s someone else’s turn to see...” He dropped Rose, who landed on the floor, breathing hard. He turned to John, grabbing his shoulders and pushing him against the wall. “See this one?” He let go of John with one hand and trailed his fingers over the brand which ran across his chest and shoulder. John shivered but nodded, deciding it was important not to show fear, but he knew he was failing.

Gamzee smiled, saying the word in all the hissing and clicking of Alternian. Tracing each letter. “Muvetir. This one means I am ‘one who freely offers’. But it really means something closer to slut.” Gamzee pressed closer to John, and the smaller human swore he could see tears in Gamzee’s eyes. “It’s because I gave in, I told them they could do whatever they wanted to me. I just wanted to make them proud. I’m sure you understand that, wanting to make someone proud of you. They told me how I could make them proud. Just open my legs up to whoever they said. I guess it is kind of motherfucking funny in some twisted way. But what do you motherfucking think?”

John stumbled over his words, not managing to say any of the ones he was thinking. Instead his eyes just traced the letters, trying to understand just what he thought, what was happening, what Gamzee’s words meant, and why the troll was crying, smiling, and raging as he spoke. John didn’t know if they were angry or sad tears, but there was too much happening.

“You’re awfully quiet. Cat got your tongue?” Gamzee let out a little laugh. Glancing around the room. “I guess I should ask if ghosts got your tongue.”

“N-no...” John stuttered out. “I-I...” he didn’t know what to say. What anyone would say. Gamzee leaned closer to John, and if one wasn’t aware of the situation it might have looked like they were going to kiss. It only made John begin to shake, and got ranked one of the most uncomfortable moments of alien proximity the human had experienced.

“I wonder if they were right, he’d get a great motherfucking laugh from it. Tell me, would that have made you happier with me? If I just came in here and lived up to what I am?” John shuddered and he
tried to look away, seeing Eridan moving forward slowly as if he was going to pull Gamzee away. The troll was pressed against him, cold breath against his neck and ear, whispering words that made John get suddenly hot with sickness. “I suppose it wouldn’t have, I probably ain’t that good, too loosened up from all the things they did to my nook.”

“Gam!”

“Eridan.”

“Please, step back, come on, wwe don’t want another Mindscar incident, do wwe?”

“Moirails with matching eyes.”

“Gam, Gamzee. Come on. Don’t do this. They wwere wwrong, but don’t hurt them.”

Gamzee pulled away from John, leaving the human breathing deeply and trying not to gag. John couldn’t exactly comprehend everything that was going on in the moment and now that he had something close to freedom, or at least was away from the tall troll, he wanted to cry.

Eridan was looking just as nervous as John was. “You okay, John?”

“Uh.” John looked pleadingly at him, not sure what to say.

Eridan nodded, tears in his eye. “It’s true. It’s fuckin’ true and he wwas beatin’ me up on the ship because before it happened I had a chance to help him and I didn’t. I didn’t think it wwas gonna go that far and I didn’t mean to make things worse, but I still did.” John let the troll hug him, and they clung together as if the hug could block out Gamzee’s words.

Gamzee stood in the middle of the room; it seemed to distort more, to be darkening as if ashy black was taking over the white-painted interior. His empty smile seemed to get more and more crazed as each second went on. Then it faded, almost popped like a bubble, and the white walls began to peel to reveal the sickness that was underneath. The room grew darker, colder, the aura of violence felt different, starker, more prone to destroy.

In some misguided attempt to stop this from happening, Jade stuttered out a few words. “Y-you said ‘they’...?”

There was a little laugh. The room didn’t right itself. “Oh yeah.” He took a few steps towards Jade. “You couldn’t see what I showed Rosey.” Gamzee turned his back, holding up his ponytail and exposing the sigils on his neck. “The one below it means I’m ‘worthless’. It’s funny because both of them were fucking me when she carved it. Seems I had some worth...” he dropped his pony tail and grabbed the edge of the hair ribbon, pulling it out and letting his hair fall to cover all of the brand on his neck. He dropped the ribbon on the ground contemptuously. “At least I can hide it easy, knowing no friend gave me that token.”

He took a little step towards Jade, when Dave's voice cut through. “Fuck. Those signs... Y-your own da-...”

The rest of the statement was lost to Gamzee's roar. It shook every living and ghostly thing in the room to their core, rattling their bones under skin. Gamzee grabbed Dave’s collar, hauled him up, and roared “HE IS NOT MY MOTHERFUCKING LUSUS!”

Dave flinched and brought his hands up to Gamzee’s. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Yeah, yeah you did.”
“It’s the best human approximation. It was a blood relative, basically your dad.” Gamzee growled, baring his teeth - they were long enough now that it was terribly frightening. Dave couldn’t help but try to recoil. “How were we suppos-”

“You know Strider, that tongue of yours is going to get you in trouble one of these days.” It seemed to be a thought spoken out loud. “My lusus abandoned me. Forced to live on beaches alone, with no one, nothing. Just me, me and my bones... He’d show up whenever, but I suppose most days he just wanted to eat me. I guess in some fucked up way, yeah, he is kinda like my lusus. But on the bright side, my lusus never pushed me over a table and shoved his bulge into me. Didn’t make me kneel and eat from his hand, didn’t fuck with me for a month for shits and grins. My lusus was shit, but my ancestor? That’s a whole other story.”

Dave’s mouth opened and closed, lost for any real words. “Gamzee... I’m sor--”

“I’m sorry, you’re sorry, they’re sorry. Fuck, the ghosts of tortures past are sorry. Everyone is motherfucking sorry. You know what the best thing about being sorry is? It doesn’t change a damn motherfucking thing. You’re right, I am a criminal, because I didn’t fucking kill myself afterwards. I should have. I was weak, I let them, I couldn’t fight. I allowed myself to be taken by my betters, I am a criminal.”

“Gamzee--”

“No, really.” He grabbed Dave’s hand and pressed it against his side, still able to hold him up with his other. “See that, they even made sure I’d never forget. Your translation sounds better than the literal. ‘Rape toy’, ain’t that sweet? I can’t ever forget what they did to me, not even if I drowned myself in sopor and ended up dead. I can never forget.” Gamzee moved Dave’s hand along his side after the troll was sure Dave had felt it. It was almost a sweet, semi-sexual touch that made Dave’s skin crawl. Dave’s eyes widened behind his glasses; he wanted to cry, he wanted to apologise, but the troll wasn’t having any of it. Gamzee just smiled humorlessly at him. It wasn’t really a smile either, it was like he was gritting his teeth and bearing them, but not to be frightening. Like he was holding something back.

“How were we supposed to know what happened?” Dave was going to try to rationalize right now. Someone had to calm him down. He glanced over at the trolls, who seemed frozen, just outside, unmoving. Dave tried to shake his head and make sense of this. “Think about if from our perspective.” Dave was going to ignore the weird feeling of strange scar tissue under his hand - not the kind of scar tissue Gamzee meant him to feel, he knew from Terezi that was a spot that made trolls purr and he wasn’t going to think about it. “You could have just told us.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to bring it up? Ever thought someone might want to forget ALL THE TERRIBLE MOTHERFUCKING SHIT THEY WERE FORCED TO DO? Things they did and didn’t mean, you know your body betrays you. IT DON’T MOTHERFUCKING LISTEN TO ANYTHING YOU BEG IT TO DO.”

“You could have had someone else tell us. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Right now, you’re being a total asshole about things, doing weird volume shifts, and what seems like trying to hurt us... or worse. That’s a dick move and makes yo--”

“You best not be finishing that sentence. ERIDAN SAID SOMETHING SIMILAR ONCE. That little fish ran headlong into his own bowl. LOST AN EYE.”

“The other one,” Jade said hesitantly, looking at the location of the marks concealed by Gamzee’s hair. “That... that’s Feferi’s- I mean the royal symbol, isn’t it?”
Gamzee set Dave down slowly, and turned to Jade, his teeth still bared in that fake smile. “I was her little grub for two months. Maybe it was just a month, or a couple weeks. I don’t know, see. I was locked up without clocks, just had them to go by. She’s a real charmer, trust me. She sat back and watched him file down my teeth, she made me smile when I was tired of smiling. Even thought of my ancestor’s happiness before hers when I woke up from passing out from blood loss.” His fingers moved down to his hip. “I was her pet. See, that’s what this one means. I’m her little pet grub. She liked it when I couldn’t talk, couldn’t do much more then whine. When you do nothing but scream and don’t have nothing to drink, you can’t talk any more. She was so happy about it. But you gotta be careful not to piss her off.” Gamzee’s other hand slid along his eye and the scar there. “Or she’ll break your eye socket and the only shit that saves you is the fact you’re your ancestor’s fuckpuppet.” Jade swallowed. “His sacrifice on demand. His to let live or die. His to be bled and offered up to the Messiahs to give him strength. I should thank him for that. Without him I would have died on the torture room floor that day. Instead I just got a cracked skull. Sweet of her, no?”

Jade shook her head. “Gamzee...”

Gamzee suddenly rounded in front of her, taking her hand and sliding it along the scar. Jade tried to pull her hand back, but the grip on her wrist was enough to break it if she pulled too hard. “You wanted to know so I’m telling you. You asked for honesty, is this honest enough? Or do you want me to tell you more?” He didn’t even give time for anyone to object. “Should I tell you that they shackled me up and filed down my teeth, then right after then I was pinned down to the floor and forced to tonguefuck her nook? Or do you want me to tell you about how wide my mouth can open now, because my ancestor always wondered what it’d be like to fit his bulge down another troll’s throat?”

Everyone in the room could see him shaking, and beyond Karkat and in shades Tavros none of them had heard that much about the events. The purpleblooded troll released Jade’s hand, and ignored her tears. His fingers flitted over to his stomach and down between his protruding hipbones, sliding down to his final scar.

“Or how I let them pail with me for food and water? How I had to agree to fill buckets with them in the hope that they’d feed me. I was so hungry and thirsty, I needed food, more than their genetic fluid that is. I’d been living off my future littermates long enough. How it took the better part of a night. How by the end I didn’t have a drop left in me to donate. How sore I was in the morning, it didn’t matter though. I got beyond soreness and pain. I got a bunch of stories, I don’t even know where to go next... Oh, how about when I tried to kill myself, my ancestor cut off each of my claws and parts of my fingers because I lost my right to choose anything about my life?”

“Gamzee,” Jade was out right sobbing now. “Please... Stop.”

“But I’m not done. There’s so much. How about the thousands of trolls they did this to before me? How about how I only could escape after I lost the will to live? How I did everything I could to keep my ancestor happy to protect my runaway friends? How they kept me drugged so I wouldn’t hurt them, or really understand what they were doing? How about when I close my eyes I dream about the new things they can do to me? How I don’t sleep, and if I do I usually end up screaming? About how sometimes I wake up in weird places around your house, some part of me injured and bleeding? How Karkat has just about stopped sleeping so no one has to be bothered with me? Should I tell you all the things they threatened me with? Tell me, what story do you want? I got one more motherfucking scar. Don’t you want to know what it means? It could mean I’m a rapist after all. Wouldn’t want to scare you soft little shits any more than I already have.”

“No...” Jade was crying, slowly falling to the floor. The stark blackness of the room faded, it warmed a little, just a touch, and that strange disconnection all of them felt except the person Gamzee was
raging at seemed to recede.

“Oh no, should I tell you about how it ain’t natural for a boy troll to like things in his nook? Turns out I’m fucked up. If they get me alive. I’ll be their little girl. I can’t even be a boy right. Heh, you know, I was so high all the time when I was a kid it took me till I was pushing seven sweeps to remember there’s even a difference between boys and girls, and now I find part of me still don’t know!” For a second the dark violent aura seemed to charge, around the room, but it continued to fade. “Looking for me, Keeper? Can you feel me now? I feel you.” Gamzee was muttering and Dave could hear it, Jade was too busy crying to process the words. Dave moved towards her, but getting close to Gamzee seemed like an impossible task. A wall of ice seemed to surround him. It made Dave feel short of breath, like he was drowning. His attention returned to Jade's sobbing form. “I’m a true motherfucking failure. I suppose I did deserve all of it. It was my place to serve them.” He spat out the last sentence. “They carved into me my purpose in life.” His claws traced the brand between his hipbones. “Ketesk. Or ‘pail’ for you sweet little humans. That’s all I am, and all I’ll ever be. Their little worthless slut, their pet pail. Their rape-toy, their pathetic little slave who couldn’t fight them off. You’re totally right, feel free to condemn me of my crimes.”

“Gamzee, stop!” Rose said, her face chalk white, in shock and so far gone she couldn’t even bring any type of plea into her voice. It was robotic. Dave had to wonder if she felt it too, or if he was the only one experiencing the strange sensation.

“Stop this.” Dave was still trying to move. “Fuckin-a, freaky shit.” That made the room spin once more, and Gamzee just stood, looking at the walls. The room twisted more, contorted more, the black over the paint seemed to create new architectural elements in the house. Dave shuddered, he couldn’t move towards Jade anymore.

“Come on, you can take me home then. I shouldn't have run. Come on, Keeper. Do your job. Take me back.” The words slipped into something Dave hadn’t heard before, a glance around the trolls seemed as utterly lost and confused. Karkat, the one who was supposed to stop this, seemed halfway buried under rubble he was trying to fight. Gamzee's words were melodic, almost as if we was singing to the darkness.

“Gamzee, please, that’s enough!” Feferi’s voice was choked with sobs. The activity around the room faded, and Gamzee turned toward Feferi, rejoining them once more.

“Oh darlin’, I ain’t up and told you the best part!” Gamzee barked out a laugh and oozed up to Feferi, almost close enough to kiss her. “Ya see, fishsister, it takes more than one troll to make a grub. She’s my bloodlink too.”

Feferi swallowed, and said “I... I know. Dr Lalonde showed me the test results. We’re too similar to be anything else but litter— no, siblings, that’s the word. Siblings. I didn’t say because I didn’t want to push you into talking about it.” Her voice dropped in volume, and she added “And I was hoping she was wrong.”

“Nah, she wasn’t.” His tone almost seemed chipper. “I know damn well it ain’t. Watched them make more little grubs. Other than joining in, they showed me... You know, you have his smile. Hers too, it’s like his smile with seadweller teeth. Wanna know why I hated being around you? You’re like both of them mixed into one troll. Then you ask me why I ran away from you. You sound just like her, a bit too broad to be exact, but, fuck, it’s all so motherfucking close.”

The trolls around the room were all staring now. “No...” Feferi muttered. “I’m not anything like them, Gamzee.”

“We both are, look at us.” With that the room shifted, and the humans swore they saw color slowly
spread across the black walls, every color they had a name for creeping up the walls like some sick Pollock painting. “One day everything holding us back will die. If we don’t end up food sooner we’ll be the same way. Taking up regular little trolls and painting our problems on them. Aren’t you excited about that?”

Feferi was pale, staring towards Gamzee. “It won’t happen,” she said softly. She seemed to be dead set on looking at him, not around the room.

“Don’t lie to yourself. I might be a criminal, I might be fucked up, and this might all be my fault. But at least I can give you a warning.” The next word he said the humans didn’t understand, but every troll’s eyes widened as Gamzee spat out “Tamisevocaenu!”

Feferi closed her mouth, unable to say anything in retaliation. She looked at Gamzee wide eyed. “Anja…” she mumbled.

“Oh yeah, sis, we both are.” Gamzee hissed back, still speaking Alternian. “How’s it feeling all being lodged in your motherfucking head like it’s been in mine? Both of us, shitfuck pathetic, no wonder we turned out so fucked up. But you know what, we weren’t actually supposed to do much more than fuck them. Let them torture us, until we broke or gave in. The only reason we’re around is because they get off pailing in the pale, and they like their little grubbies.”

With the change in scenery, the room seemed less tough to navigate through. The humans could finally catch their breath, just to look between both Feferi and Gamzee wide eyed, it was the most Alternian they had heard spoken at once, and whatever Gamzee was saying was obviously cutting Feferi down. Tears were brimming in her eyes. She looked as if someone had slammed a bat into her chest and she couldn’t even gasp for air.

Feferi took a step back as Gamzee pressed even closer to her. “They told me all the things they gonna be doing to the both of us when they catch us. Should I warn you or let it be a surprise? At least you’ll motherfucking know that. Not like I did. I saved you that shock.”

“Ga-... It- it...” Feferi couldn’t even speak. She quickly turned tail and ran, trying to hide her sobbing.

“Feferi!”

Everyone fell silent again. Equius’ obsession with rank had faded a little, but never before had he presumed to call the heiress by her first name. He stopped still as he realised what had come from his mouth, and blushed slightly blue, before straightening himself up and marching outside after her, Nepeta and Sollux scurrying at his heels. The torpor that kept them from moving had lifted. The room was still cold, but nothing like it had been.

Gamzze let out something that looked close to a smile, but far more grim. He looked towards the humans. “Anything else you want to know? Any other crimes you need me to tell you?”

The humans stood in silence, wondering what he had said to Feferi, and where she had gone. If Gamzze’s question was actually a question and not something that would come up anyway regardless of what they said or did.

Rose broke the silence. “Wait. They did all this to you, and by your society’s standards, you are the one who did something wrong?”

“Weren’t you paying attention when we watched that movie? I was sure someone motherfucking told you what happens on Alternia. See, I’m to blame, I’m weak, pathetic, I let them use me. I did it.
They were just getting rid of a weak genetic link. The only reason they bred with me is because they wanted grubs to torture later. I ain’t really fit to still be alive. All of it, everything they did, it’s my motherfucking fault. I deserved it.”

“N-no, Gamzee, no, it’s not your fault! The only ones to blame are them.” Jade’s voice was hoarse, and wet, but she tried to give it strength.

“I didn’t help,” Eridan choked out. “He messaged me and Equ, and we did nothing. I was preocc- no, no excuses. I was a fuckin’ moron. I shoulda said something, I didn’t, and I deserved every damn punch he threw at me. For a while I did think he was gonna fuck me. Wouldn’t been wwithin his rights, but he didn’t. If I thought it would help, I wouldn’t let him noww.”

“All you are so cute. You can’t help me now.” Gamzee looked around the room. “Shit, you never could motherfucking help me. What would you have done? Come and rescued me from him? Shit, being mad at you is my next stupid motherfucking crime. For my treatment of you I apologize, I fucked up, suppose I was just teaching you for when we’re caught.” The humans followed the trolls’ lead and as his voice shifted a bit louder the whole room moved away from him. “It don’t really matter the fault. I can see it for what it is, a warning.”

“Gamzee,” Aradia said softly. “Don’t let that voice win...” She had odd pauses in her words like she was trying to talk through all of them talking to her at once. There was actual happiness in his smile for the briefest moment, though it made the whole room even colder.

“Look like him, don’t I? Funny, I can feel him looking for me, bridge it I did, don’t matter now though, he knows where my physicals is. He’ll have no problem finding my fuckin’ soul,” he mumbled to no one in particular. “I wouldn’t be letting that voice do anything. It’s already won. It’s been right this whole time. It’d be easy you know? Just snap their necks, make it quick, walk on back to the ship, call them, and get myself back where I belong.”

“Gamzee, please,” Aradia said. “Keep fighting it. We’re behind you, you’ll have us. Unless you turn into--”

“It’s the easy path though,” Gamzee growled, turning towards her. “I’ve been fucking trying and I just motherfucking found out I’m back at the beginning. I’m tired of climbing uphill only to find out I’ve been digging a motherfucking hole.”

“No, you’re not at the beginning.” Aradia couldn’t help moving away from him. “You’re just at another fork in the road.” Gamzee looked like he wanted to laugh, he looked like he wanted to smile. Instead his face set itself into a frown. “Fight it please. For our sake.”

“For the sake of what? Getting captured later? All of you will get to watch, that’s why I never talked about it. You’d all get to watch and I guess get to watch again. It’d be better to--”

“Hey,” Karkat stepped forward, not getting too close. The last thing he wanted to do was freak out the taller troll more. “We have a chance to win, if not we have a back-up plan. You know this, none of us are going to go with them alive. It’s always been that way, and being on Earth hasn’t changed it.” Gamzee’s posture relaxed slightly. “I know you sometimes have selective hearing, or maybe it’s selective memory retention, but we’re not going to let any of that happen. If worst comes to worst... I’ll follow you, I’ll follow you into the dark and you won’t have to face him alone.”

The room went from arctic levels of cold to slightly warmer. The change was subtle enough most missed it. Instead the humans looked between each other. All of them felt obligated to say something; they started this, it only seemed right to assist in fixing it.
“Gamzee,” Rose said softly, “I apologise, I didn’t mean to bring this up.”

“Ain’t nothing to apologize for, you were right. Well, sort of. You just got my position mixed up. Don’t say you didn’t mean to bring this up, because you did.”

“I mean, if I had known the actual event. I never would have confronted you like this. I wouldn’t have ever brought it up to you.”

“No, no it’s good that you did. Puts you squishy things into motherfucking perspective.”

“We don’t want to hurt you,” Jade said softly. “We just were scared that you might hurt us.”

“I could still—” Gamzee hissed. “MOTHERFUCKING HURT YOU. That was always a possibility, it’s funny you focused on me though, easy enough as I am. I mean, motherfuckers, I could pull your heads off your backs and bring out your spine with it. I could have done that from the get go. Pulled out all that FREAKSHOW CHERRY RED ZERO DEGREE and painted something to make the Messiahs proud.” Jade stepped back again. “But I didn’t, could have but didn’t. Didn’t even whisper it into your hearclots when you were sleeping. Didn’t mutter it in my thinkpan. But don’t worry, I don’t mind losing friends. Better to lose you than kill you. No matter what part of me wants.”

“Gamzee, we’re sorry.” Jade bit her lip.

“No, really, dude, we didn’t mean to hurt you or say things that made you get crazy.”

“Well, let it all out. I motherfucking promise that I won’t harm a hair on your head.” Dave tried to stand up tall again and square off with the troll. “Anything else you need to motherfucking tell me, or is that motherfucking it?”

“It’s just... you’re really creepy dude. Things didn’t add up so we had to snoop. No one would give us an honest answer about what happened, or why it seemed like everyone walked on eggshells around you. So we looked into it, and we came to the wrong conclusion. But for the record it’s never okay to threaten to kill someone. Especially when they are trying to apologise for hurting you. That might be okay in trollworld but in humanworld that’s fucked up.”

“Do you even have the MOTHERFUCKING RIGHT to tell me what to do? You think that even if I started you could stop me? I could kill every last living thing on this planet, and right now I wouldn’t feel a motherfucking thing about it. I know that I’d feel it later, but RIGHT NOW THERE AIN’T NO CARING. You, Dave Strider, a tiny human boy from Texas with no formal training is going to stop me? I DON’T THINK YOU MOTHERFUCKING UNDERSTAND HOW FUNNY THAT IS.... Anyway, who said that was any type of threat? I was just motherfucking telling you what I motherfucking wanted to do. Just because you want something don’t mean you get it.”

“Karkat,” Kanaya mumbled towards the smaller troll. “Do you remember that conversation we had?”

“I don’t care if you think he’s a lost cause. I’m not doing it. He’s not lost, just hurt.”

“Your idealism might be the death of us. If it progresses I will kill him myself.”

Gamzee heard her. “Oh come on fangysis, don’t you motherfucking think it’s funny? Those little humans against one of us. Really against one of us? Laughing at that doesn’t mean a troll needs to be mercy-culled, it’s hilarious.”

“You’re not laughing.” Kanaya’s words were dry and she was holding her lipstick tube tightly. “I don’t think you find it funny either.”
“On the motherfucking opposite, I find it hilarious. I’m laughing on the inside. Anything else humans? Or are you done...?” Gamzee’s words trailed off; there was more to the thought but he never stated it. It seemed like the conversation internalized.

“I can’t think of anything el-—”

“Why didn’t you just say? Just tell us that something had happened. You could have just mentioned it or asked Karkat to, we wouldn’t have pried.” Rose said. “I’ll own up to my mistake but why not... I guess we thought you might have done... Those things to your friends, and perhaps thought if they knew what you had done, they had their own crimes, which would explain why no one mentioned it. Protecting each other isn’t unheard of...”

John dug his fingers into his own hair. “Fuck. And... and we thought you were trying to get Mom drunk.”

“Oh, I was, Johnny, I was. I was trying to make sure she COULDN’T FUCK ME LIKE THE LAST SOBER ADULTS DID!”

There was a crash, and everyone was knocked out of their fear as they looked and saw Dr Lalonde halfway down the stairs, a shattered vodka bottle on the floor where she had dropped it over the handrail. She flew down the stairs and stopped just inches away from Gamzee, face white and arms outstretched. Very slowly, the shadows and icy winds started to dispel, leaving only an exhausted Gamzee.

“Babe,” she said, trying to hide her slur, sounding like she was about to cry. “Babe, that’s not okay.”

Gamzee blinked dazedly and glanced around the room, as if he’d find some clue on what to do. “I... it...” He shrank away, not meeting Dr Lalonde’s eyes. “’M sorry, Ma--Doc... Doc, I wasn’t gonna do nothin’ to your wigglers, I swear...”

“No, no listen here.” Gamzee backed away. “I’m not going to hurt you...” Dr Lalonde added softly.

“I’m sorry ma’am... I didn’t me- I mean I didn’t think. I wasn’t really going to hurt them. I wouldn’t have...”

“I don’t think you were going to, babe. Now listen, no one is going to hurt you. No one is going to talk except for me and you, okay?” Dr Lalonde glanced around the room. “You’re safe here. I’m not going to hurt you, and you don’t have to worry about anyone else hurting you.”

“I-I... won’t.” Karkat had seen all these signs before. The sudden rapid breathing, the involuntary motion backwards. Gamzee’s claws inching towards his arm. “It’s okay, you don’t need to take time with me. It’s alright. I’m okay now... I got angry and stupid before. I won’t do it again. I swear. I’ll-- I promise. I’ll be good.”

“No, babe, I’m not mad. I’m not angry. You don’t have to apologize.”

“Let me leave. Just let me go,” Gamzee mumbled, his breath rough and fast. His eyes closed tightly. “I can’t right now.”

“Promise me something, babe.”

“What?”

“You won’t run away or hurt yourself.” Gamzee nodded. “Okay, I’m going to go so you can, okay?” Dr Lalonde was near tears as she backed away slowly. Gamzee didn’t move until she was
away from him.

“Mom?” Rose looked at her mother, tears gathering in her own eyes and her fingers entwined. She gnawed her lip for a moment, then ran to hug her mother, unable to suppress her crying anymore. “I’m sorry, Mom, I should have told you what I thought, I should have told him, I... I don’t know what I should have done.”

“Nor do I, honey, nor do I.”

The remaining humans looked torn between following Rose and Dr Lalonde out of the room and staying put so they couldn’t be hurt. The trolls were mostly still, except for the small glances towards each other to make sure everything was staying okay.

“Gamzee?” Tavros was the first to speak, inching towards the taller troll. “Are you okay?” He reached out his hand, hoping that this time the purpleblood wouldn’t recoil, and they hadn’t been reset back to him shying away from all of them. The hope quickly died when Gamzee took a step back and away from the motion.

“I need to leave, I need to motherfucking go,” he mumbled quickly, casting around the room for the best escape plan. Tavros dropped his hand and nodded. “I need to be alone.” Karkat moved, and Gamzee snarled “I SAID ALONE. Don’t motherfucking follow me.”

With that, he ran to the basement door and slammed it behind him.

--

Tamisevocaenu - Moirail Bastard
Dave stared into space, face slack with shock. “Okay, so the guy who sprinkles the word ‘motherfucker’ into his sentences like salt on fries actually did get fucked against his will by his actual mother?”

“Well, from what I’ve gathered of their biology, she’s genetically more like his ‘other father’ and their shared ‘mother’ is a giant moth. But… yes, basically,” Rose said, pale and sounding far away. She squeezed her own mother’s hand tighter and decaptchalogued tissues.

“Right.” Dave decaptchalogued a sword and slapped it hard on the coffee table, leaving a scar in the varnish. “I claim the right to join in the attack on the crazy fishbitch for her terrible misuse of irony.”

“You’d need training,” Vriska said matter-of-factly. “Seriously, I like fighting. I’m looking forward to a fight, but at the same time I’m not rushing into hordes of adult trolls looking to take them down. We’re not prepared for this fight, you squishy little things would be devastated. More hassle than help.”

“I don’t know about that, my bro and I practice stuff all the time - sure, it’s not like actual battle stuff, but I know some things. It’s not like I just have this shitty sword for no reason, I kind of know how to use it.”

“Do you know how to use it against an eight-foot troll who wants nothing more than to smash your head in and suck out your insides?”

“Not that exactly, but I’m pretty sure I could handle myself. Anger from misusing an art form fuels me to rip them a new not ironic-in-the-slightest hole”

“That’s what’s pissing you off? Irony?”

“Excuse my cousin, young male humans aren’t good at admitting compassion.”

“I’ll join too,” Jade said, looking down at the table. “My weapon’s distance and judging by what Eridan said your kind doesn’t quite remember bullets. So I’m sure it would be a surprise, especially if I used incendiary rounds. I feel like it’s only fair.”

“All of you are idiots!” Karkat said with a sigh. “We’ve trained our whole lives to be able to have any skill in combat, against fellow trolls and other species. You don’t just wake up one day and say you’re going to take on the Alternian Empire. On top of that, you guys could hardly handle Gamzee. I don’t mean taking him down in a fight, I meant you all froze.”

“Psh, that’s what you think. Anyway, you froze too! Also, we have the home-field advantage, we know Earth and as long as you guys know how much data they have, we know what they don’t and what they do know.”

“Guerrilla warfare worked before and we’ll have it work again,” Jade said. “Anyway, we might be soft and fleshy, but we have things on Earth all of you don’t have or remember. I’m pretty sure when they try to invade the army will mobilize. I don’t know if Earth has an alien invasion plan, but maybe
they do. For all I know there is some type of weapon in a satellite above Earth for it. I don’t know, I’m sure that would be top secret too.”

“I’m not saying you can’t fight,” Vriska said, leaning back. “I’m just saying you’d need training.”

“Then fine, we’ll fight with you guys. But I want a piece of that woman’s head.”

“You’re going to try to face the Empress in combat?” Vriska laughed. “You have a death wish?”

“Hell yeah I am. If we don’t fight we risk an introduction with Bozo McBatshit’s special balloon animal anyway.”

“If you use that disgusting description in front of Gamzee, I won’t stop him from disembowelling you,” groaned Karkat.

“-so it’s not like we have much to lose. Besides, I don’t think she’d be expecting some soft fleshy space monkey to tear into her with a sword. I have the element of surprise.”

“I don’t think trolls would be expecting to be lit on fire by a gun, and on top of that get full of holes from scatter rounds.”

“Maybe,” John said, “we can get a bit historical and pour boiling oil on them. I think you can buy mines, we could lace the area around the house with them. Surprise attack from underground.”

“I don’t know how I feel about mines being dropped around my house. But I do agree, there have to be things we can to to help other than ducking and covering. I understand you brought them here, and it wasn’t your intention to endanger us. But despite my earlier missteps, and perhaps that makes it stronger, we are something akin to friends, and this is our planet. We’ll want to defend it. On top of the need to help all of you due to the empathic bond we’ve created.”

“I kind of like the idea of mines, and as long as we know where they are it would give us a pretty good advantage, and we could make like distractions. Like fake houses full of mannequins so they don’t know where to attack? Maybe rig up some C4 bombs or something. Chuck dynamite at them. I’m sure the Empress wouldn’t expect a face full of explosives.”

Karkat sighed, as the humans continued to ramble on about other ways they would attack or try to help, Dave focused on taking down the Empress. While Karkat admired their willingness to help; it was draining to try to explain this situation. He was about to shut them up when the troll beside him cleared his throat.

“Uhh, I think you’re all missing the point here,” said Tavros, shuffling his feet. “Which is, if you try to fight her, you’ll all die, uhh, horribly. Unless Karkat’s right and you have some special abilities, that you’re, uhh, not telling us about.”

Karkat had almost completely forgotten about that, but there was a good chance, there was no way a species could be the top of the food chain without something to aid it. “You must, right?” he asked hopefully. “I mean, come on. You’re all…” He gestured vaguely. “… soft pink meat things, you’ve got no claws or fangs or horns, you can’t even really spit venom, do you really expect us to believe you’ve survived with nothing? A species like that must have some kind of defense or they’d all be dead, right?”

Rose stared at him. “No.”

“Fuuuuck,” Karkat groaned, and rested his forehead on the wall.
“Are you sure?” asked Tavros. “I mean, most people don’t think Tinkerbull could do anything like that either.”

There was a pause, during which the trolls and humans all stared briefly at Tavros, then at the tiny bull in his arms. John broke the silence. “Do we want to know?”

“Uhh, yeah, see his horns?” Tavros touched the ridiculously oversized protrusions on the little bull’s head. “They secrete acid. They fly in flocks, see, and they break up big stuff to eat by flying right through it.”

“By ‘big stuff’, you mean…?”

“Uhh, pretty much anything. Trees, bushes… really big animals… rocks that happen to be in the way…”

“Yes, very funny,” said Kanaya, shuffling away slightly.

“Actually, he’s right,” Eridan said. “I used to see ‘em if I fleww inland sometimes. Wwhat, you havn’t heard a’ that?”

“Well, yeah, most people haven’t. ‘Cause, um, they tend to, uhh, kill everyone who notices.” Tavros cuddled his lusus more firmly and muttered “Wish we had a few more of him, then we might have a real advantage.”

Rose backed away slightly. “Okay, once we’ve dealt with Gamzee’s situation, I think we need to have a talk about why I would prefer to receive full disclosure before bringing dangerous animals into my home.”

Tinkerbull squeaked happily at the attention, completely unaware of the situation around him.

“He wouldn’t hurt any of you, but that’s how they gather food for their charges. A bunch of, uh, them get together and take it down then divide it up.” Tavros shrugged. “Why else d’you think I didn’t go, um…” he mouthed the next word, “vegetarian… sooner? He doesn’t have a, um, need to attack here. I keep him fed, and you all are nice to him.”

“Still, acid secreting bull-fairy… I just said that,” Rose sighed, “… falls under the heading of dangerous animal.” She massaged her temples. “I cannot believe the topic changes our conversations so often feature.”

“Wait, wait, you can talk to him, right, Tavros?” Dave said. “Well, maybe you can, like talk to the other forest animals around here and send them on the offensive.”

“I don’t think an army of nut creatures would, uhh, help us much. But really, if you don’t have some type of awesome adaptation, how are you the, uh, top species of your planet?”

“No, we don’t have claws, fangs, horns, poison, etcetera. I guess if a human is put under enough strain we can do things considered “superhuman”. But we cannot just access those parts of us at will. Humans are the top of the food chain because of our brains. We’re able to fashion tools, outthink our prey, and work with our surroundings. On earth survival of the fittest doesn’t mean the strongest, or the smartest, but the most adaptable.”

“That’s not going to be much use,” Karkat said with a sigh. “You’ll just all assimilate well to the new Empire.”

“Humans also don’t go down without a fight,” Jade said sharply. “If the whole world was at risk of
enslavement, we’d throw out petty fights and work together to keep our species, our ways of life, and our freedom… Even if the group doesn’t have much, no human wants to be a slave, let alone one to an alien race. We’re persistent. Also, don’t be so pessimistic, don’t you think you guys can take them down?”

Karkat sighed, “I think we have a tiny chance of being able to. If everything falls right. But really, all of us would rather go down fighting than die on our knees… Or worse… We know, if we fail, just what will happen. It’s all very well for you, they’ll probably just eat you. If we’re taken alive… All of us would rather die than let that happen. The odds, to me, are about one in a million that we’ll win, and that’s with losses. Like if Feferi is the only one to survive, all of us getting out of it alive is even slimmer. A snowball’s chance in hell, I think is your race’s phrase.”

John forced a smile. “Well, don’t get too down. In the words of a great human author, million-to-one chances crop up nine times out of ten.”

~~~

“Feferi… Your High- Feferi! Where are you?”

“FF! Are you okay?”

A soft bubbling noise from the stream alerted the trolls. Feferi was floating midstream, pink tears staining the water, her gills fluttering with her sobs. Sollux splashed out beside her, treading water inexpertly as he reached the deepest point. Equius reached out a hand.


Feferi raised her head from the water, not looking him in the eye. “Do you think Gamzee was lying?”

“No.” Equius sighed. “I can’t imagine he’d need to make up something like that.”

Feferi shifted, covering her face with her hands. Another wave of fresh sobs racked her body. It sounded like she was trying to say something, but neither Sollux nor Equius could make out the words she was trying to make.

“FF, it’s okay…”

Feferi sputtered on the sob. “It’s not okay.” They could sort of make out those words.

“Feferi,” Equius said slowly, “I do not think any less of you with that information and I’m sure no one else here does. Why don’t we go inside, get you something to drink, and maybe get you some rest? No doubt crying that hard is going to hurt your gills.”

“He’s right FF, I don’t care about that. I’m more worried thome human ith going to thee you out here, or you’re going to get hurt.”

Feferi let Sollux lead her slowly to the edge of the stream, and didn’t resist as Nepeta and Equius took their hands and helped both trolls onto land. Equius’ eyes widened as he saw her arms; pink lines marred the grey skin where her claws had dug in. She caught him looking.

“I-I couldn’t stand it. I just wanted to reach in and tear out my blood. I couldn’t stop myself.”

“Oh, FF…” Tears ran down from behind Sollux’s glasses, and he mopped at the wounds with a handkerchief. Nepeta glanced nervously around and shuffled her feet, unsure what she could do.
Equius stood to attention and cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Your- Feferi, please don’t harm yourself over this. That’s not an order, of course, it’s… a request from a friend who would be hurt if you were.”

“What?” Feferi wiped tears off her goggles and blinked at him. “Y-you really don’t mind? I’d have thought you of all trolls would have hated me…”

“As I said earlier in reference to Makara, you did nothing wrong. Your lineage is unfortunate, but we knew that already, and Nepeta was right when she told me blood does not necessarily reflect on the troll, whether that refers to colour or… other factors. I hope you’ll find it in you to forgive the foolishness of my youth in disbelieving that. That was before I knew you.”

“This is terrible.” Feferi muttered. “I don’t know if I should even fight her. I mean, I know none of you guys care, but… I might be weaker, mutated because of it. How could I rule with that? How do I stand a chance against her? I’m not just saying that because right now I’m pretty disgusted by my blood, but I mean in general. How do I fight her, when I could turn out worse?”

“FF, listen to me,” Sollux said. “You can’t be worse than her. That’s impossible.”

“I agree with Ca- Sollux,” Equius said with a nod. “You can’t be worse than her and what she has done to the Empire. So you should have no worries there. Plus, if you do ever get anxious that you are turning into something negative, we will be beside you. I know I will always be there, and if you wish I would be happy to be your check. Keep in mind, I do not believe you could become that terrible.”

“Feferi?” Nepeta said. She moved over and grabbed onto both of Feferi’s hands. “Honestly, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter, we knew she was terrible before. This just proves that she has a double standard. One I know you won’t have… But can I point out something slightly positive about this whole thing?”

“What?”

“Well, I don’t want to come off rude, but if your genes are partially the Highblood’s… technically wouldn’t you be stronger than her? Most of those studies haven’t been done in sweeps. They could be wrong.”

“Can’t believe I agree with NP. Think about this, if thhe hath tht standard why would they want anyone elthe… I mean, making it illegal would…”

“I get the picture!” Feferi said. “I guess, but… what—”

Equius reached out a hand and placed it under Feferi’s chin very gently, barely touching her. “Why worry about the what-if’s? If you were mutated, or there was something wrong with you, we’d already see it. As it stands you are a mighty force, a beautiful heart, and wise beyond your years. I believe in your ability.”

Feferi sniffed and bit her lip. “I don’t want this. I don’t want to have to do this, but I’m the only one who can.” Carefully, half-expecting him to pull away, she moved closer to Equius and leaned against him. “I can’t do this on my own. I need you, all of you.”

Sollux’s lip curled in an uneasy growl. “Hey, hey, I’m thtanding right here and tho’th hith moi—”

Nepeta kicked him hard in the ankle. “That’s enough from you, Mither Catpurr. Can’t you tell the difference?”
“Diff- oh. Maybe we thhould back off.”

“I agree. Twice in one day? We ought to go strife before we flip! Ah, we’ll see you both inside.” Nepeta said, before grabbing Sollux’s wrist and attempting to drag him off. Equius and Feferi watched as it quickly turned into a slight battle of who was going to be dragging who.

“As long as you can put up with them being black, I would happily be there for you in... all ways possible.” Equius’ face quickly turned bright blue. Feferi could sense his eyes darting around behind his glasses.

“We should go inside, I should clean up these wounds. We should also probably talk to the humans. Gamzee’s powers are terrible on trolls, I can’t imagine them on humans. We should see if he did use them.”

Equius nodded, pulling away from Feferi and pulling out a towel from his captchalogue. Feferi stole it from his hand. “Feferi?”

“Mind lifting me up?” Equius moved as gently as possible, pulling her into his arms, then bringing her up to eye level with him. “Thank you.”

“It’s hardly an issue, my strength only seems greater with my pupation.”

Feferi wrapped the towel around his neck. “That’s very good, and for the record, you’re allowed to help me with whatever you’d like.”

“Fe-Feferi.” Equius was blushing again, and she smiled as she could see the sweat beading on his brow. She lifted the towel and patted it along his forehead.

“Do you hate him?”

“Pardon?”

“Gamzee. Do you hate him?”

“Yes, but what does this have to do with anything?”

“I think he could use some of it soon. A moirail is one thing, and auspistice another, but if that would have been me... And even just with the knowledge of my... start, I don’t feel like I’m really worth having. Tavros won’t talk to him, he’ll give Gamzee space until he comes forward himself. Right now he needs a push.”

“Feferi.”

“I need all of us, every last one of us. I can’t face them alone, I can’t face them with just the six. We’re a team. I think it’s time you either help him or drop the attraction.”

“I understand.”

“That wasn’t an order.”

“I know, but you’re right.”

Equius moved to set her down. Feferi responded by clutching onto the towel around his neck tighter. “I said soon, not right now,” she said firmly.

“Oh, I see.”
“There is still one thing I’d like to say to you.”

“What’s that?” Feferi leaned forward and pressed her lips against his. She could feel his face get the slightest bit warmer, and another slight sheet of sweat appear. She pulled away, her own cheeks a bit pink from the action.

“That wasn’t exactly something that was said.”

“No, it wasn’t. But that’s just to keep you here a bit longer.” She kissed him again, wrapping her arms around his neck and with terrible gentleness he returned the action. “Saktaneeru, drozaanrinii.” Feferi nearly whispered the words against his lips.

“Saktaneeru, Kohallanaan.”

~~~

Equius found Gamzee in the corner of the basement, clutching his shirt in one hand, hugging his knees, staring into space. Equius stared for a long moment, waiting to see if Gamzee would register he was there. When nothing happened, Equius moved forward slowly; he remembered Karkat mentioning not to touch him. Instead, he just waved his hand in front of Gamzee’s face. It took a few moments, but his eyes slowly refocused and he looked over at Equius.

"High- Gamzee. Gamzee, are you feeling more in control?"

"Fuck off."

"Fine. The humans wanted to apologise, but they didn’t want to go looking for you in case you were still violent. I’ll tell them you don’t want to talk yet."

Equius turned to leave, and heard Gamzee shift. He turned back, and let his eyes meet Gamzee’s still-smouldering glare.

"I’d totally have told them you deserved it if it was you."

"Would you really?"

Gamzee’s gaze dropped to the floor. “… No;” he mumbled. He actually sounded surprised.

"Well then." Equius shook his head. "Gamzee, you are quite possibly the most obnoxious person I have ever had the misfortune to meet. But you’re not necessarily a bad person. There is a difference, and it took me too long to learn that."

Gamzee scowled.

"Stand up."

"What?"

"I said, stand up."

"I motherfucking heard you. You presuming to order me?"

"Consider it an impertinently-phrased suggestion. I think our group’s beyond deference now."

Gamzee stood up, curious. Equius looked him up and down, then carefully gripped his shoulder and placed one claw at the edge of his brand. Gamzee looked down, and hissed between his teeth as the
claw tore skin.

"Ffffuck! What-?"

"Stay still."

Gamzee couldn’t have broken the grip if he’d tried, and he was reluctant to move in case the claw hit a vein; with the way his pulse was racing he feared he’d have bled out in seconds. Equius stopped cutting into him, moved his hand, and tore open a fresh wound over the brand above Gamzee’s grubscar. By now the surprise had faded and he was able to ignore the pain, and he watched in fascination, realising what Equius was doing. He tensed but didn’t move when the claw moved down to his hip and dipped under his waistband to cut the third one.

The fourth brand, ketesk, was cut through, and Equius released him. Gamzee slumped against the wall, watching his blood drip down. The cuts weren’t too deep, just enough to sting, and enough that he knew they’d scar. The slurs on his skin were neatly crossed through. He looked up at Equius, who was sniffing the blood on his fingers.

"Hm. Terezi has a point, it’s not bad." He licked it. "You might want to test your blood sugar level at some point."

Gamzee stared at him, and spluttered “What the motherfucking hell was that for?”

Equius nodded at him. “I’ll not hate you for a lie, Makara.”

“You don’t make any motherfucking sense.”

“I’m making perfect sense, perhaps you need smaller words to understand me.”

“I am getting your words into my understanding. That isn’t what I was saying. You put so much into our order, to being in the right, to observing our places. Don’t you think I should keep the brands of my betters? I mean you all said it was my place.”

“Those are not your place. Those are nothing more than lies. I kept the only one relating to your place. I reserve my judgement on the one on your back.”

“You’ve got a shit sense of humor.” Gamzee shifted, then looked up at Equius. He cleared his throat slightly. It was obvious the purpleblooded troll was unsure, and the next word out of his mouth was hardly above a whisper. “Jisituneeru?”

Equius gave a small smile. “Jisituneeru,” he said strongly, proud of his choice. “I almost forgot…” Equius eyed the brand on Gamzee’s arm. The only one on Gamzee’s front he hadn’t cut through. He moved his hand forward; Gamzee wrenched his arm away from from the taller troll, holding it close to his chest like some type of precious possession. He backed up a little bit from Equius and ended up bumping into the wall. Equius raised an eyebrow, enough to demand an explanation.

“You can carve any of them out, I don’t give a shit about the others. But, motherfucker, you don’t touch this one.”

“For it being the biggest lie on you, you are oddly attached to it.”

“There is a long story to it. One I didn’t really make at mentioning at the humans. You don’t motherfucking touch it.”

“Why would you keep it on you? Or want to? I can understand many things, but wouldn’t you want
“Consider it my curiosity, I want to remove it. It’s slander and lies. I see no one of a higher caste who owns you. Only one of a low—”

“You ain’t wanting to finish up that phrasing motherfucker.” Gamzee shook his head. “It links me to him, for time and eternity. He did carnival magic with me. I guess it was sort of the second time, before he made me a sacrifice. But this…” Equius cocked his head to the side. “It links me to my kin, the brothers and sisters who came before. And when I die, I’ll be in his power until the Vast Honk comes and frees us all. But it keeps me with them. If you break it that way, it might free me but won’t free them. I promised them I’d all try to free them. Redeem me of my blood, of my sigil, redeem me of how much I all am like him.” Gamzee sighed again. “See, this ain’t spades shit, this is something motherfucking else.”

“It is important for me to know. This… relationship, will not be typical. Nothing involving our group ever is, it seems. Perhaps for the better, but I do not entirely know. However, I accept that strangeness, though I do need to understand you to make it work. Now, come on, get your head out of your behind and go to the humans and allow them to apologise.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m still pissed. I’ll fucking come out and be chatty with them when my head isn’t bent on tearing them limb from limb or scraping the skin off their skulls and hopefully painting on the bone while they still breathe.”

“Charming.” Equius sighed. “Fine, I’ll tell them.” He headed back up the stairs, pausing and looking back when he reached the top, smiling very slightly. “You probably should wash and bind those. It would be a shame if you got them infected and died now.”

“Fucker,” Gamzee growled, but there was no real anger in it. At least, none aimed at Equius.
Gamzee watched his spinning clubs draw patterns against the night sky, focusing on the blurs of colour so he didn’t have to think of anything else. His shoes rapped out patterns on the tiles, the noise joining the sound of the running river below. His freshly-bandaged cuts hurt as his motion pulled at them, but he found he liked it. He felt more at peace now than he had all day. Now he was not a troll, he was a weapon.

The practise dummy stood in the centre of the roof. Gamzee built up speed, twisting and turning, dodging imaginary attacks.

Words slid through his mind. *Are you going to keep fucking up?* He gritted his teeth and hissed.

“No.”

He pushed off, launching himself at the wood-and-cloth doll, landing astride it as his clubs came down. The wood smashed and splintered and he kept striking, wishing it was a skull, seeing invisible showers of pink and purple, and of red.

“I hate you! I hate you! I motherfucking hate you!”

“Yo.”

Gamzee’s clubs nearly took the skin off Dave’s nose.

“Whoa! Okay, I know you’re mad, but can you hold off on showing me your smacks till I have a chance to talk?” Dave held up a twelve-pack and a bag of green leafy stuff. “I brought a peace offering.”

Gamzee scowled, ripped off a can, and opened it. “You have until I finish this...” Gamzee glanced at the label. "Beer." He popped the tab and started gulping it down.

Dave sighed. “Okay, look, nothing I can do is gonna make up for what I said. And I won’t insult you by pretending I know what it’s like for you, but... I do know what it’s like to be hurt by someone who was supposed to care for you, and I do know what it’s like to have your body fuck you over. So if you ever want to talk about it with someone who has a tiny inkling of how bad that sucks, and if you can forgive me...”

Gamzee finished the dregs of the beer and blinked at Dave. “Wait, what?”

“You probably don’t wanna know the details. Like I said, it’s not even close to how bad what happened to you is, I don’t wanna-”

“Strider, you can’t say something like that and then not tell me what you mean. It ain’t like I’m in any place to be judging - and, fuck, we just today saw what happens when we ain’t making with the motherfucking info.”

“...Okay, if you’re sure.” Dave sat down with a sigh, and Gamzee dropped down beside him. “Well, in my case it was kinda flipped turnways from yours. My folks hurt me because my body was fucking me over.” He pulled the neck of his shirt down, exposing a faint scar, clearly several years old. “That’s all the damage they did on the outside. My head’s mostly okay with it now too.”

“What’d they do that for?”
“How much did you catch from Rose’s lecture on human reproductive biology a few weeks back?”

“I was there for the whole thing. Kinda wish I hadn’t have been though, it’s pretty weird the way you humans all make other humans. But I caught the most of it. Girls got nooks, males got bulges. They tango and eventually you get an offspring after a few months. Do I need to be knowing anything more specific?”

“No, no, you did catch the gist of it. That’s usually how it works. Usually. Okay, how to explain this... I was born a girl, well, that’s what I looked like without clothes, so everyone thought I was a girl. I had a girl name and everything. My parents were really excited I was a girl and they bought me dresses and other stuff for girls. But I didn’t like it, because to me I wasn’t a girl. I didn’t like girl things. I liked boy things, at first I thought I was weird, but I was really uncomfortable with all the girl stuff, it made me feel like I was lying about who I was. I wanted to be a boy. So I set out to be a boy. My parents didn’t like it, they told me it was bad and I shouldn’t do it. So I kept it hidden for a while, because I didn’t want to make them mad. I know it’s not really there with you guys, but usually when a person has long hair they’re a girl on Earth, if they have short hair they’re a boy. One day I got fed up with hiding and pretending, and I hated my hair so I cut it. My mom freaked out and... well, almost stabbed me.”

“Oh.” Gamzee said, unsure of what to say. The words hit pretty close to home, in some weird way. Not exact, but weirdly they made sense, despite a nearly unimaginable amount of space between both their worlds. Not knowing what to say, he grabbed another beer and drank it, slower this time.

“This is like the sincerest apology I’ve ever had to do. But I mean it, I didn’t mean to be an asshole to you. I feel terrible about what I said, but you know I might understand your body fucking you over, and being angry at it. I was angry for a long time. Even if my bro was cool enough to call me Dave and buy me boy stuff. I was still mad about why me and why I had to go through it. I wanted to be normal, I got pissed off...”

“I don’t know what to say, motherfucker. To be honest, I can all forgive you and your friends for it. It makes my head all chattery if I don’t, so it’s being good for me to be giving into the mother fuckin' forgiveness with you, bro. I’m sorry about your luscestors being motherfucks about your shit. I don’t think my lusus would have all cared if I’d have been having those problems. My ancestor would have, but he’s not part of this discussion. Really, well, he is but not about that, I don’t think. I’m just being happy I ain’t raised by him like you guys. I don’t know how motherfucking terrible I’d be turning out. But I’m all sorry about them being bad to you. Ain’t cool at all, and I hope you are feeling more comfortable in you. Shit would be terrible if you weren’t.”

Dave raised an eyebrow. “Okay, smack away if I’m getting too deep into your business, but that kind of sounded like you get what I mean in ways you haven’t talked about.” He picked up another beer and swore as the ringpull came off in his hand.

“Here, swap,” Gamzee said, handing over a fresh can and taking the broken one. He used one huge canine tooth to puncture the top, and drank. Dave remembered what he’d said had happened to his teeth, and winced.

Gamzee looked down at the can, rolling it between his palms. “I haven’t talked about a few things with anyone, it’s motherfucking hard to talk about.” Dave nodded, not rushing the troll but still showing he was listening and he understood. That’s what his therapist had done. When the troll had been quiet too long he swallowed another gulp and pulled out a pipe.

“It isn’t, um, sopor, but it’s pretty nice shit. Relaxes you, helps me sleep when I’m having trouble. This is more of a party blend then a sleeping blend though. You want some? If not, you mind if I do?”
Gamzee eyed what Dave had in his hand. “I shouldn’t, but.. I would kill the entire fleet to be stoned again.” Dave nodded and opened the bag, he started to pack it in. “How much were you paying attention to Vriska and Karkat’s discussion about all that shit?”

“Not a lot, I was more focusing on the cake. Come on, you’ve eaten John’s cooking, it could distract me if the house was on fire.” Dave furrowed his brow. “Something about girls make shit and boys destroy shit, except it’s okay for everyone to paint and kill things?”

“Killing is both creative and destructive. You are either destroying life or making way for new life. Painting or art in general is both as well. Either you are creating something for others to look at or you are destroying an idea in yourself,” Gamzee said softly, repeating words he had pounded into his head from months and months ago. “Females, or those that have venom sacs, are inherently creative. They are the movers of genetic material, they are meticulous, planning, cunning. This is all culture, it has nothing to do with organs, keep that in some motherfucking mind. Males on the other hand will rush into battle, they are innately destructive. Think of it like this, girls make the plans, boys execute them. Not that girls can’t, but they prefer to create them. Not that men can’t create them, they just prefer not to.”

“Alright. That makes sense, sort of, it’s kind of similar to our own.”

“Only we want women in power, men wouldn’t be good ruling. There is only one seat and that’s the Empress’ seat. She has advisors, both male and female, but they don’t rule anything, they’re just there to keep numbers in line and bounce ideas off of. Men don’t rule the Empire. They would destroy it. S’posedly.”

“Women would create it. That makes some kind of weird poetic sense.”

“Exactly.” Gamzee took a drink. “So it’s kind of like yours? How is yours different?”

“Short answer, till pretty recently everyone thought being female made you useless.”

“Strider, serious answers here.”

“That was a serious answer. It’s been getting better really slowly over a really long time, but yeah, girls were pushed down pretty badly, still are in a lot of places. And it can be much worse for people who don’t fit perfectly in the girl or boy boxes. We fought back, and it’s not perfect, but it’s getting better.” Dave finished his beer and fiddled with a lighter. “I mean, I live in Texas, which ain’t the most tolerant place on Earth. Bro asked me more than once when I was a kid if I thought I’d do better if we moved out of state, but I just dug my heels in harder. It’s my fucking home too, I’m not letting the idiots have it. If we did it’d never get better.”

“Makes sense to me, that’s why Feferi and us are doing what we’re doing. There are plenty of good trolls culled for stupid reasons. Karkat for example, he would have been culled ‘cause his blood isn’t on the spectrum, but he’s a damn good fighter. He wanted to be a threshecutioner. Would have done a damn fine job at it. But no, that motherfucker can’t do nothing, he’d just be killed. The only reason Tav’s got legs is because Equius was bored. No normal motherfucking highblood in their right mind would give a brownblood legs, even if they would be kick-ass for the Empire.”

“Well, human women were lowbloods, and men were highbloods for a long time.” Dave paused to take another puff and drink. “You mentioned you were or are religious right?” Gamzee nodded, looking a little grim. “Sorry, should I not have brought it up?”

“No, you can say your thoughts.”
“On Earth there is this massive religion, long story short this all powerful guy created the world in seven days and made man. Well, man was lonely so God, that all powerful being, took one of his ribs and made man a companion. It was a girl, and they lived in this paradise where nothing ever went wrong and they were always happy. But there was one rule, they couldn’t eat from this tree. Well, the woman was seduced by a snake and ate a fruit from it and cursed mankind to never find paradise while on Earth. God cursed her with painful childbirth, and all sorts of other bullshit.”

“That sounds pretty ridiculous, but I ain’t one to judge. I’m sure my shit sounds just as motherfucking stupid to you.”

“I’m in no place to judge your beliefs, but that story pretty much sums up how genders were treated on Earth. Men liked to blame women for all that was wrong. Of course there is another side to that where women blame men for everything that’s wrong and that’s pretty stupid too. Equal to me means equal. And to me my opinion on the matter is all that matters to me.” Dave touched his shoulder and chuckled humourlessly. “I’ve been told God hates me for the way I am. I say if He did Mom wouldn’t have missed my face with the scissors.”

“I’m in the camp that if a god or the spirits hate you you wouldn’t have made it past your first wiggling day. On Alternia men and women are equal. They have equal power and responsibility. It’s just their roles are pretty different. And you have to abide by them, there are no questions asked and no alternatives to it. I’m sure you can understand that with the way your parents all been treating you.”

“You’re surprisingly deep and intelligent when you get through the way you word things,” Dave said, passing the pipe over to Gamzee. “Light the lighter, hold it over the bud and inhale. I hope it works the same on aliens as it does on humans. You deserve something to help you unwind.”

Gamzee nodded, lifting the pipe to his lips and following the instructions. “So, what does this have to do with anything? Not saying it doesn’t just wondering.”

Gamzee passed the pipe back, his mouth feeling pretty dry; the smoke was odd, not really painful, not really good, just a thing that was happening. “The rules are there for trolls, they’re strict in the church. I always knew I was a little weird. I up and researched and thought hard on the spirit I wanted to devote myself to. Who I knew would have my back no matter what. I never told anyone, because I couldn’t have the one I wanted, I wasn’t allowed to devote to her. I could offer to her but never worship. If I’d have been told my ancestor any of that he would have had a field day. Breaking all my bones, or doing something less but more painful all to me so I’d understand how that motherfucking shit was unacceptable. But he noticed... other things, things I never knew before him, I was too stoned to ever find out. He noticed it and that shit’s just been sitting in my thinkpan like some sick weakness and I can’t find the cure.”

“Huh?” Dave, already slightly out of it, blinked. “Hey, if you mean what I think you mean, there’s nothing about stickin’ stuff in your pussy that makes you less of a man. I should know,” he bragged, made even more tactless than usual by intoxication.

“In my wh-? Oh. Heh, kittysis’d get a kick out of that.” Gamzee sighed. “I don’t know. I mean that just mighta been a weird biology thing, but there was that, and a bunch of other shit that wouldn’t mean much on its own, but put it all up and motherfucking together...”

“Even if, there isn’t anything wrong with not fitting into a box. Boxes are pretty lame when you think about it. I struggled with that for a while, but they are boxes. And they have boundaries, to really live you can’t let yourself be confined like that. So what if you’re not perfectly molded into a clone of some asshat, or just like everyone else? I hope when you guys kick the old regime out you take that as part of your social change. Not everyone has to be uniform. Yeah, there are some things
groups of people shouldn’t do. Like with humans killing is a big no-no, so all humans should try not to kill things. But like, that doesn’t mean we all have to be white men from high-income families who settle down with a white stay-at-home mom and have two-point-five kids and live in a white picket fence house with three-point-five bathrooms. All types of people can be successful and yeah.”

Dave stared for a moment, taking another drink of his beer. “And I lost my train of thought. I don’t know where I was going with that.”

“I don’t know, I feel wrong about it sometimes, sometimes it don’t bother me. And this shit is actually pretty motherfucking’ good. Doesn’t shut my head up as much as sopor but it does make me relaxed.” Dave smiled at Gamzee’s comment. “Like no matter what, how I think about what he said to me it hurts. But like some days the thought don’t bother me. Like I’d be okay if I was willing to all be like that with someone, I wouldn’t be thinking there was anything wrong with it. But other days the thought just sounds painful. I ain’t just talking sex, I’m talking about actions and roles too. It’s so fucking complicated. I don’t even know how to be motherfucking talking about it.”

“Yeah, thing is—” Dave lost his train of thought again, and blinked for a while. “Thing is with gender shit is it doesn’t nesh—necess—always mean anything. You could be as girly as Jade and still be a boy if you thought you were one. But if you think it does mean something, that might mean it does. If you see what I mean.” He thought for a while, and looked sideways at Gamzee, licking his dry lips awkwardly. “Uh, I’m not a shrink, but it sounds to me like you might do well to browse around the human interwebs a bit and look up ‘genderqueer’. Only one who can say if that’s where you’re at is you, but I dunno, I’ve heard this kind of thing before sometimes.”

“Hm.” Gamzee swallowed the last of his beer. “Eh, motherfucking gender, how does it work?”

“If we knew that, my alien brosis, both our worlds would be much happier places,” Dave sighed. “Seriously, try not to get too down on yourself about this. It’s not ideal, but being ashamed of shit you can’t control is the fastest way to die. You might be upright and breathing, but you won’t be living.”

“You’re not as much of an asshole as you pretend to be, you can’t let yourself be all hard all the time.” Gamzee said it slowly, looking at Dave. “Seriously, it be good for you to let yourself be a little more out there sometimes.”

“When did this start to be about me?” Dave’s words were just as slow, and holding on to a sentence was getting difficult.

“You said, I was being surprisingly smart. I can say you are surprisingly all motherfucking nice.”

“Thanks,” Dave mumbled, gesturing with the pipe in one hand and a beer can in the other. “Y’know, maybe you should see a shrink.”

“A what?”

“Headshrinker. Counsellor. Therapist. Whatever, just someone you can spill to who’ll know what to say.”

Gamzee stared at him. “You want me to see a pale hooker?”

Dave almost rolled off the roof laughing. “No-no-no, I don’t want you to see a hooker. A therapist is different than your mawreels. They don’t have an emotional attachment and they help you get through your terrible shit objectively. Eventually there is a sort of bond there but it’s a professional relationship. It’s a business here on Earth. They have training to help you deal with shit. Like if you get freaked out how to cope with like healthy shit not like lashing out or retreating.”
“Oh, okay, this is one of your human things. I’d have to talk to Karkat, but... Wait, how could I see someone? I dunno if you noticed, but I’m kind of obviously not a human. I’d like to get help but I draw the line at sawing the rest of my motherfucking horns off to get it.”

“Internet,” Dave said. “Your bee guy is right, it solves everything.”

Gamzee nodded. “If Karkat’s okay with it, it sounds a lot like pale for motherfucking hire. But if you say it isn’t... I don’t know if I should be trusting you humans, with all your pale infidelity around here.”

“Sheesh, a shrink is not a hooker. Though I would pay to see you call a shrink that. Hey, you know, you like music, right? I think I got my phone around here. You should hear some songs and shit. I think it might help you out. When I get all down in the dumps, music helps get me out of my fog.”

“I don’t know, I like some of your human music, other stuff I don’t like. It is really different then Alternian stuff.”

“Sorry about exposing you to shitty clown rappers, I just thought--”

“Ain’t no skin under my claws, bro, just don’t do it a-fucking-gain.”

“Come on, brosis, let us learn you a tune. And I will be learning it to you well.” Dave turned on the music, put down the phone, and grabbed the last beer. “Neither of us came out too lucky, did we? You got the universe’s most batshit parents, I got mixed-up bits, and don’t tell anyone I told you this, but...” He tapped his glasses. “I’m actually blind as a bat. Albino genes come with a lot of screwing up in the eye department. Took me forever to learn to draw without it looking like shit un-ironically. But that’s not so bad.” He raised the can, and gestured to Gamzee to do the same. “We’re fucked up, we played the genetic lottery and lost. We’re hopeless, but you know what? We earned every breath we take, and let’s own it... Fuck ups and freaks for life, brosis.”

“Yeah, fuck ups and freaks for life, my human brother.”

They clasped the hands not holding beer, and started to sway and step awkwardly in rough time with the music. Drunk and relieved of tension, they started to laugh, then to sing along; Dave first, then Gamzee as he picked up the chorus.

“I’m beautiful in my way, ’cause God makes no mistakes, I’m on the right track, baby, I was born this way...”
Chapter 52

Kanaya knocked politely on the door and Rose distractedly called "Come in." The troll opened the door, finding Rose at her desk, sitting up straight but bleary-eyed and makeup-free.

"Rose, have you been awake all night?"

Rose nodded, not bothering to deny it. "I couldn't sleep. Everything that happened yesterday... that was my fault. I couldn't just come out and ask what had happened, I had to play detective, and we hurt your friend horribly because of it." She scowled up at the ceiling. "That and he and my cousin wouldn't shut up all night, but I don't begrudge him that if it helped."

“I can understand how you might be worried about us, and perhaps we should have gave all of you some basic information. However, on Naelenurenna it became customary to not talk about it. To avoid it at all costs. Gamzee was quite restrained when he talked to you about it. Previously, he would try to murder anyone and everyone. Part of his highblood curse, I assume. But trust me when I say Gamzee is quite resilient and it’s more than likely that once he’s had time to process everything that occurred he’ll apologize for being so, ah, direct. I would be ready with a similar apology.”

“Thank you for the advice. Still, I feel terrible. I was convinced the mark on his arm made him something terrible. Perhaps I was just worried because it is something new and humans don’t do too well with new. I had to assume another shoe would fall.”

“It’s perfectly understandable, and I ask that you don’t beat yourself up over it. Trolls don’t do so well with new things either. For being so advanced with technology and meeting so many different sentient species, we’re suspicious and superstitious still. I can forgive you for being very similar to us.” Kanaya gave Rose a little smile. “You look exhausted, perhaps some rest would help you?”

“No, I need to finish this.”

Kanaya looked at the computer screen, carefully avoiding actually reading Rose’s private communications. "I see you are writing an email?"

"Yes, to my birth father. I don't know if he'll reply, but after what Gamzee said, I wanted to apologise for ever having said anything remotely uncomplimentary about my own family." Rose looked over and shook her head. "I don’t know, maybe I should get some rest and read this over when I’m more awake.”

“It is never good to make or send any message without reading it with a clear head. Mistakes can be made, ones that are difficult to fix,” Kanaya said. “Shall I take my leave?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, perhaps we could talk some more...” Rose said softly, turning toward the troll and seeing her face brighten. “I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep easily. Maybe someone to talk to would help calm my mind.”

“It’s so strange to me how your rampant pale-infidelity actually does work.” Kanaya smiled. “I don’t mind listening to your thoughts, and I will offer my best counsel.”

Rose sat down on her bed, pulling her yarn and needles out from her sylladex. Kanaya took this as a hint that this conversation could actually be a long one, and it might be advantageous for her to have something to do as well. She pulled out her own sewing and both of them silently worked for a moment.
“May I ask you a few questions, Kanaya?”

“Of course, I shall do my best to answer them.”

“These questions aren’t meant to be insensitive, but I have to know. You see, come this fall I am
beginning a human tradition that helps us train and learn for our future careers.”

“Yes, I remember, a building for schoolfeeding. College, if I recall, is what it is called.”

“Indeed, well, you see the profession I am going into studies the mind of other humans. I will study
the pasts of humans, the way they reacted, and how they cope afterwards. To better understand the
situation it helps for me to look at things like this analytically. To do so I require more information
from you.”

“I can see how you would be in a predicament with the minds of trolls. You will have to accept some
things from me as fact, especially as far as Gamzee is concerned. His... thoughts have never been
there fully, before or after his conscription.”

“Why did he go, if so many of you stayed behind?”

“Honestly, none of us know. Karkat asked him and Gamzee just shrugged. I do not believe he is
even sure why he went. That might be a question better reserved for him, when he’s not angry.
Asking Gamzee about that time is a coin toss, either he’ll answer you in a detached sort of manner or
attempt to hurt you. Yesterday was the first time I’ve seen it as both.”

“Have all of you forgiven him for his... rampages?” Rose scooted a little closer to Kanaya.

“For the most part. I told Karkat that if he snapped and we couldn’t get Gamzee back we would have
to mercy cull him. Not so much for us, but for him. We all know it’s the last thing he wants. He
doesn’t really want to be like his ancestor.”

“I see, what usually happens when this happens to other trolls?”

“Death.”

“I mean, what do you do?”

Kanaya shrugged. “We don’t really know, this is the first time I’ve ever heard of a troll surviving it
and not ending up dead. It’s a lot less common than you think. With humans it seems to be more
common, but with trolls I guess most just see it as a waste. Why not just kill them? I can sort of see
why, it’s a grace. Merciful even. Gamzee was never all there, but since it happened he’s
progressively gotten worse. When we arrived here he started to improve... I’m not saying he still
won’t improve further. But he started to become more stable, before we arrived any little thing could
set him off.”

"If he's been so badly traumatised, is it really a good idea for him to have entered a new relationship -
or relationships, rather - so soon? Most humans would be less able to handle the emotional
requirements of a romantic relationship with such fresh mental wounds, and it’s a lot of pressure on
the partner."

"Yes, well, trolls cope much better psychologically when they are in relationships. We're a difficult
species in that manner; naturally both solitary and co-dependent. It makes for some clashes." Kanaya
re-threaded her needle. "It's partly instinct and partly the cultural pressure, but not being in at least
one quadrant causes severe stress to most trolls of our age. The drones come at ten sweeps, so most
of us get started on the concupiscent ones early. In Gamzee's case, the conciliatory ones were far
more important. Without Karkat, Eridan, and Nepeta stepping in, he’d probably have killed us all. We don’t really resent him for it, though. It’s what trolls do, and of course he was on a psychological knife-edge even more so than most of us.”

Rose’s needles stopped clicking. “Ah.”

“What?”

Rose was silent for a while, then said “Well, not being straightforward made things much worse yesterday, so I shall give simplicity a try. Are you pursuing me with the sole intention of filling a quadrant? I don’t believe you would wish to use me in that manner, but I would like some reassurance that who the people in your quadrants are does matter.”

Kanaya blushed, looking down at the fabric and needle in her hand. “My intentions are very pure, Rose. I find your company quite enjoyable, as well as your intelligence, and that fun human sarcasm thing you do so often. Forgive me if there were any mixed signals. I do enjoy your company, and more so I would wish to continue to enjoy it. Whether or not we are in a quadrant. Though if my intentions are sickeningly clear, you obviously understand my hope and wish. The rest of it is up to you…”

Rose’s hand moved towards Kanaya’s. “Thank you. I just wanted the assurance. I trust you.” Kanaya looked up, and they shared a smile. Kanaya set down the fabric in her free hand and leaned forward...

Something ruined the moment by clattering against the window. Rose looked out to see an empty beer can in the flowerbed. She opened the window and peered out. “Dave, are you still on the roof?”

“No, we’re in the basement and decided to toss garbage around via telekinesis,” came the reply, followed by a groan. “ Damn, I’m hungover…” Dave leaned over the gutter. “Can someone put the ladder back up? I knocked it down last night and I forgot to bring up enough beer to make me drunk enough to jump.”

“Wuss,” came a croaky voice from beside him, and a purple-black blur fell past the window. Gamzee landed on his feet, then fell off-balance and landed on his rump. “Ow!” He got up and shook himself, grumbling, but much to the relief of the onlookers he was smiling very slightly. He looked up at Rose and waved. “Hey.”

“Oh, hello.” Rose adjusted her posture, ready to duck if Gamzee threw something. “About yesterday, I would like to offer my most sincere apologies, and if there’s anything I can do…”

“Apology accepted, but can we talk later?” Gamzee said, wincing and rubbing his horn base. “I got me one huge motherfuckin’ headache right now.”

Rose nodded and shut the window. Kanaya shook her head. “I pity you in both the troll and human senses of the word for having to put up with them. Sorry for inflicting my shipmates on you.”

“Funny, I was about to say the same thing to you.”

~~~

Gamzee entered the kitchen and made a beeline for the sink, his mouth dried out by alcohol and smoke. He filled a glass and drank slowly, reassuring himself, relaxing in the knowledge that here he never had to bargain for anything, especially not something as simple as clean water when he wanted it.
“Oh, hey, you’re up. Or down.” Karkat was sitting at the table, looking tired. “Feeling any better?”

Gamzee shrugged. “Eh, a bit...” His eye was caught by the colourful object on the table, and he nearly dropped the glass in surprise.

It was a cake. Of course. A huge one, which smelled like chocolate. The decoration was perfectly formed; John must have been up all night as well. Every inch of the cake’s surface was covered in frosted script in rainbow colours:

SORRY SORRY SORRY SORRY SORRY SORRY SORRY SORRY

“I was waiting for you,” Karkat said, picking up a cake knife. “John didn’t think it was a good idea to see you in person till he was sure you’d calmed down, so he asked me to deliver this. He says he knows it won’t make everything better, but at least it’s a start.”

“Baking cheers me up a bit,” Gamzee sighed. “I talked with Strider, we had some wicked friendship come up and infect us. It helped, to actually hear and see how sorry he was... If he was all twisting his shame about what he said I can guess the other humans are all contorted over it.” He shook his head. “Honestly, I can’t blame them too much. With the info they had, I wouldn’t have trusted me.”

“You should let them apologize in person, they were pretty upset at how much they upset you. Not that anyone blames you for how upset you got. I was pissed off the moment it really started, and that was the first time I have ever seen Tavros get angry enough about something to yell.”

“I’ll talk to the all of them when the sun all rises and they are a bit more perky. I think Kanaya is all cuddled up with Rose though so I ain’t going to interrupt. Even if I am, right now, feeling better. I don’t know if I can get my head all up and okay with them talking to me about it and asking questions. If they do I don’t want to do that whole freak out routine I did at you.” Gamzee looked up, hiding slightly under his hair. “Uh, speaking of the humans, Stribro said something last night which is a little weird but he thinks it might help, ‘cause let’s face it, none of us have any motherfucking clue what to do with me.”

“What did he tell you?”

“Humans have this thing, people, who are meant to help when a motherfucker goes through shit like this. They are trained to help them get through it. I told him it sounded like a pale hooker which isn’t some shit I need. But he said that it ain’t, it’s professional, and they teach you how to deal with things... Since no one knows what to do with me, motherfuck, I don’t even got inklings to what I’m supposed to do with me, maybe it would help.”

Karkat frowned. “Why the hell would humans need that? They go round committing pale infidelity with whoever looks at them, I don’t get why they’d pay for it as well...”

“No, it’s... well, I don’t really get the difference but maybe I would if he explained it again when he wasn’t drunk, or I wasn’t drunk. He says it’s not the same, anyway. But still, I don’t wanna try it without you okaying it.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s a good idea. Someone else could do it better than me.”

“What? No, they won’t be a better palemate than you, nobody could be! Just... they’d know what was up. Apparently humans survive this kind of shit more often than trolls do. So a human would know better how to handle it.”

“Judging by their movies and shows, I guess they do. Seeing as crimes like, uh, that tend to end in murder in the Empire. As opposed to us letting them live. It’s not something we really have
experience in. I guess it would be okay. I mean I’m pretty much stabbing blindly trying to help you with this. If someone can figure out how or knows how it would be better for the both of us. Stop me from ringing out my thinkpan over your general idiocy.”

“You’re too nice to me, you know that.” Gamzee reached his hand forward and curled his fingers with Karkat. Karkat couldn’t help the tiny smile that twitched at the ends of his lips. After all of that coming to the forefront again, Gamzee wasn’t trying to keep himself from touching. Maybe things were looking better after all.

“Gamzee?”

“Huh?”

“Two things, first... I’m happy, I can tell you’re already getting better. And second, the humans said we should have just mentioned that something bad had happened. That they would have kept the movies and stuff from bringing it up, so when they talk to you don’t get mad that they said you should have brought it up. What they mean is that one of us should have mentioned that you went through some tough shit.”

“Got it, bro, I won’t get mad at them again.” Gamzee sighed. “Takes a lot of energy to be pissed off all the time. Not to say, I’m over it in any means, but I am just tired of being angry all the time.” He looked around. “Where is everyone? I mean, I know Kanaya’s with Rose and Strider’s gone to sleep off the hangover, but...”

“Strife practice in the woods. Including Dr Lalonde, she put the booze away for once and got out her handgun instead.” Karkat looked at Gamzee’s surprised face. “What, you were expecting anything less from the humans? You thought they’d kick us out? They’re more keen than ever to help you now! They’re probably going to be worse than useless, but at least they mean well.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good thing. I don’t want them to get hurt. It’s bad enough with all of you...”

“Don’t, you don’t deserve to get hurt or killed anymore than the rest of us. It’s our choice, I chose to stand beside you and Feferi. Better than rotting away in a cave somewhere, this is all our choice, not something you’ve shouldered us into.”

“I know, but I don’t want any of you to get hurt.”

“Well I don’t want you to get hurt. Does that mean you’ll chose to sit on the sidelines with your thumb up your wastechute? No, it doesn’t. You’ll stand beside us and take these useless fuckers down. Then you can do whatever you want, but we’re all going to stand together, as a team. The same one we’ve always been. Full of useless personal drama, terrible headaches, and the most annoying told-you-so’s.”

“You say you’d have been a shit leader.”

“I’m a fucking great leader.” Gamzee raised an eyebrow. “Fine, I occasionally have my massive doubts but right now I’m the greatest most fantastic fucking leader this side of the endless void.”

Gamzee looked up at a sound, to see Feferi behind him. Her eyes were swollen and pink, but she was forcing a smile. “Oh, hey there... Uh, look, Fef-”

“Before you say anything, I’d like to show you something,” she said quickly.

Gamzee raised an eyebrow. “What?”
Feferi raised her forearm, and Gamzee’s jaw dropped. Cut neatly into her skin were two sigils, his and hers, still bloody.

“I couldn’t see the back of my own neck, so I had to put it here,” she said, as if that was going to be his question.

“What the... This some kind of sick joke?” Gamzee growled, his hackles rising.

“No. I’d rather neither of us is caught and I’ll do everything I can to make sure it doesn’t happen, but if you are, I’m not letting you go in alone again.” She touched the sigils. “We own these signs too, we can take them back. Now we’re wearing each other’s signs, we’re bound on equal footing to each other, not to them.”

“Feferi....” Gamzee said, slowly reaching a hand out towards her arm. “You don’t need to do that, despite my own motherfucking crazy... I didn’t mean it, you’re nothing like them. I’m just stupid.”

“This isn’t about that, Gamzee. Listen, I’m sorry I was pushy and kept forcing you to be around me. I didn’t realize it scared you. But you know what? If they want us, they can try. I refuse to let them take you. I will not let him or her make you ashamed of something that is also yours, or make you scared of something that’s mine. I won’t let them twist me around like that either! These sigils on my arm are not theirs. They are yours and mine. They get to exist together because we’re genetically related. The ones on the back of your neck are there for the same reason. They don’t get them, they are ours.”

Gamzee smiled vaguely, Feferi knew it was the best any of them really got. “You shouldn’t have done it.”

“Why? Because now...” Feferi moved forward and wrapped her arm around his shoulders and neck, pulling him into a hug. “... we line up and we always will. This makes us stronger together than we could ever be apart.”

Gamzee hesitated but moved one of his arms around her, indescribable emotions churning in his stomach. He didn’t know if he wanted to laugh, cry, or push her away. Instead, he just held her in a hug.

“You know what?” Feferi mumbled against his shoulder. He could feel her smile. “Maybe you had a good idea. We can be a little like them.” Gamzee pulled back, confused and nervous. Feferi’s smile just widened making her look devious. “Inseparable and a force to be reckoned with. I think we can take that from them. They hurt you? That means we have to take them down. If they hurt me it’s the same thing. I suppose in other circumstances it would make them proud. But right now it’s directed at them.”

“Feferi, you’re one strange troll,” Gamzee said, shaking his head, part of him confused, the other part scared. Neither seemed to really matter. “Maybe you’re right.”

“If all of the studying I’ve been doing means anything, i’s that we should make every negative a positive. You know better than anyone what they are capable of, where their weaknesses lie. But it showed us something else.” Gamzee couldn’t help but smile. Her expression was reminiscent of the Empress. It was hell-bent, but there was something else there. Internally Gamzee decided it was heart, or Feferi’s own spark of life. “They don’t even know that they should be afraid of stepping foot on this planet. There will be no fury like mine. No anger more consuming. You don’t hurt my... brother, only I am allowed to do that.”

Gamzee opened and closed his mouth a few times, unsure what to say. Finally, he settled for “...
Thanks, Fef. Uh, just to make it official...” He reached up and touched his hair, brushing it away from his neck, and slowly turned. Feferi rested her clawtips on the scars, pausing. Gamzee looked Karkat in the eye for support, and nodded. He didn’t even twitch as Feferi’s claws reopened the brands. Her own scarred arm moved around him, and he gently pushed his claws into the cuts, scraping off the dried blood. Now the marks were truly theirs.

Feferi finished and drew away from him, and he heard her sniff. He turned and saw pink tears on her cheeks, but now she was smiling for real, and he managed to return it.

Karkat raised the knife again. “So, does anyone want some cake?”
Chapter 53

It was a lovely evening to be outdoors, but Billy Fallon was starting to get thirsty. The seven-year-old picked up his football and headed for the back door. It was slightly ajar, and he peeked in to see his mother at the kitchen table, tapping her pen on a notepad. He stayed outside. That was Mam’s thinking face. Thirst was getting the better of him, and maybe if he snuck in real quick, he wouldn’t interrupt his mam. He tread into the house cautiously, and tried to make quick work of getting a glass of water, or maybe he could snag a Coke. Mam looked busy, and maybe she wouldn’t notice.

“-- Either it’s from a movie or something similar, because these pieces don’t add up.” Mam sounded upset so he put the coke idea on hold, he didn’t want to get in trouble. “Both are leaders, but this clown religion… Unless it’s because clowns are scary and no one likes them, prev--”

“I like clowns!” Billy said indignantly.

Mam spun around and gasped when she saw him. “Billy! Oh, you scared me, boy. How long have you been there? This conversation’s not for little ears.”

“Just a second,” Billy said. “What’s wrong with talking about clowns?”

“Nothing’s wrong with talking about clowns, but this talk about clowns is work related.”

“Oh, but I like clowns, they’re not so bad. Are you working with a clown, mam?” Billy was still standing in the doorway, he had almost forgot his mission. He moved to go get himself something to drink.

“No, I’m not working with a clown. Are you coming in for the evening?” At that moment, his dad came in and stood in the doorway, ready to make sure Billy didn’t just stay close to his working mother. Mom looked over at him, some kind of talk was had. He always knew because his parents could just look at each other, though that usually meant he got in trouble.

“No, just thirsty. Can I have a Coke?” he asked hopefully, expecting a no.

“Okay, sweetie.” Mam looked in the fridge and pulled out a can.

Billy’s eyes narrowed in a frown, even as he took the can and clutched it covetously. “You never let me have Coke between meals. You always say it’ll rot my teeth if I drink too much.”

“I felt like treating you,” said Mam with a shrug. “Now come here and give me a hug.”

“Um, okay,” Billy said, letting his mother scoop him up. It was tighter than her usual hugs, and he shifted in her grip. He knew the signs; bad day at work. “Are you okay, Mam?”

“Yes, dear. I’m fine. I just want you to know your daddy and I love you very much.”

Billy was confused, but he returned the hug. “Yeah, I know, love you too.” His mam gave him a tight squeeze, not letting go for quite sometime. She only got like this when her work was really hard or really sad. Last time she had been crying, saying it was because someone at work was really sad too. He gave her an additional squeeze for good measure. He didn’t like seeing Mam sad. He popped the tab on his coke as soon as he pulled away, and walked out of the room. He could barely hear his mam sigh and the tapping of her pen return.

Mr Fallon nodded as his son headed back to the garden. “You’re a fine mother, Deirdre. Don’t forget
“Thanks, Sean - I do have help from a wonderful father,” she said, smiling sadly at him, still tapping her pen. “And maybe this is vain of me to say, but dear God, I hope he and his sister never have to realise exactly how lucky they are.”

She looked back at her file. Gaspar Makara. What a mess.

~

It wasn’t unknown for Deirdre’s clients to call from far away. That was why she worked over Skype; people who couldn’t see a therapist face to face could access help from their own homes. Having someone from America wasn’t common, but nor was it particularly eyebrow-raising. She did wonder what the client’s relationship to the woman who had booked and paid for the appointments was; the woman in question was none other than the famous Dr Roxanne Lalonde, and she’d never heard the name Makara connected with the Lalondes. Then again, Dr Lalonde was paying her a hefty bonus on top of her hourly fee to talk to this boy, so she didn’t like to ask too many questions. Could have been a nephew or something, though she hoped not. She wouldn’t wish relatives like his on anyone.

Gaspar Makara. Eighteen years old. Currently living in New York State, though he sounded vaguely like he’d originally come from the Deep South, as far as she could tell through the odd scratchy tone to his voice. Ritual abuse survivor, recovering drug addict, agoraphobia, insomnia, anger management issues, a few hints about gender identity issues which he hadn’t really gone into, depths of self-loathing she’d rarely seen before, and generally more issues than a magazine storage warehouse.

They had talked a few times now; the first two meetings had been more awkward than any she really had previously. It seemed as if therapy was new to him, which he had confessed that he had never done anything like it before. For some reason he’d giggled when saying that, sounding embarrassed; must have been nerves. In fact it seemed like human interaction in general was new to him too. He left long pauses in between words, almost as if speaking to another human was difficult for him or something he hadn’t done often. She didn’t think much of it at first, but as his story began to come out it made sense.

Apparently, he’d never known his birth parents, and had been raised till the age of eighteen by a well-off but neglectful foster-father he constantly referred to as “the old goat”, and had turned to sedatives to numb the misery. Naturally, when he’d run into a man who had proof of being his birth father, he’d been overjoyed and hadn’t questioned the situation too closely, and had gone home with him, too high to think his actions through. For the first month he’d been treated relatively normally as far as he could tell, but his father had been slipping him enough medication to keep him sick and off-balance, and would pick random moments to hurt him while persuading him he had done something to deserve it. Gaspar had been too drugged to question why he was being hurt, or why he wasn’t allowed outside. Then his birth mother had shown up; from what Deirdre had picked up, they belonged to some strange cult. What had happened after that, well... she was no longer shocked by many things her patients said, but this was definitely a difficult case. Gaspar had managed to escape after two months locked in the basement, and was now living with Dr Lalonde.

She didn’t know why he’d picked her. She liked to think she was talented, and admittedly she had rather more first-hand experience of severe abuse than she would have liked, not that she ever let her clients pick up any hint of that, but she was still quite young and hadn’t been practicing for all that long. There were plenty of more experienced counsellors out there, and if Dr Lalonde was involved she could afford the best of the best. But no, Gaspar wanted her. He liked her, said she was
approachable - or, in his words, a “motherfucking sweet lady”. Apparently he’d discussed her with his best friend and his boyfriend, and they approved of her as well. She had asked why he hadn’t picked someone closer to home, but that had a more concrete explanation; he was afraid to set foot outside and terrified to speak to strangers in person, unsurprisingly, and the doctors he’d spoken to in America just wanted to dope him up, which he didn’t want so soon after coming off recreational drugs. So he picked her for the job, and her it was.

She had her headset on and was waiting for his call to come in, reading over what she knew already and preparing herself for another sick adventure into the kid’s past. Deirdre tapped the tips of her fingers idly on the desk. The headphones beeped and she quickly accepted the call.

“Hey, Miss Fallon.” Gaspar sounded ill, or maybe his usually weird speech was stronger than normal.

“How are you feeling sick?”

“No, I just haven’t been to sleep yet...” He sounded a little guilty at that. She had once talked to him about his insomnia. But he swore it wasn’t a problem, just an occasional thing.

“Are you ready to start yet, or do you want to talk about something else for a bit?”

“No, see, I be good to... um, go, usually soon as we are being connected. I get my thoughts... all in order so I can talk to you. I don’t like wasting your time with pointless crap. You’re nice enough to be talking to me about this anyway. What did you all want to be talking about today, or is this one of those things where I tell you about what’s rattling around in my brain-container?”

One of the few happy things about talking to Gaspar was seeing what new slang words he’d use this time. She wondered sometimes where he’d picked them up. Neologisms were sometimes a trait associated with autism, but he didn’t seem to be on the spectrum in any other way, though maybe it was buried under all his other problems. “I can listen to you, it sounds like you need to talk this session. What was specifically on your mind?”

He was silent for a while, and then said “Did... Did I tell you I got a twin sister?”

Deirdre frowned. “No, I don’t believe you did.”

“Well, Fe- Faith and I sorta didn’t know each other well. Different... foster homes.”

“Have you met her? Or do you just know about her?”

“I’ve met her, I heard a lot about her too, but I’ve gotten to kind of know her. She seems all types of nice... She was really happy when we met, smiling, shaking my hand, being friendly. But I know she all is related. I can tell, it makes it worse though that I can.” Gaspar sighed. “She is real nice, I feel like all types of wicked mean when I tell her I don’t have any of the thrills to be speaking with her or being close, but I can’t all and tell her the real motherfucking reason. Instead I sort of put my body in lockdown, and my bloodbeat gets stupid, it can’t decide if it’s going to stop or start. She’s nice though, according to everyone, I have had the same knowing of her. Like through mutual friends, she apparently is really sweet, very noble.”

“How much does she know about what happened? Have you seen her since then, spoken to her?”

“Yes, I ran into her when I wasn’t really up and expecting it soon after I got out and she saw...” Deirdre couldn’t see him, but she guessed he was touching the scars on his face which he’d told her about. “I didn’t ever want her to know, but she found out. I mean, what if it was her and not me they found? It’s bad enough having that in my own motherfucking thinkpan, I don’t wanna put it up in
“Does she know exactly who did it?”

“No, I didn’t really tell her, I couldn’t really tell her. She knows it happened, but I couldn’t really mention it to her... I see her and I see them, and I think about if she would have been with them...”

“Have you found yourself feeling resentful?”

“I-I don’t really know. I think maybe, but I don’t wish it on her. I don’t know if I am. I wish that neither of us went through it. I don’t want her to, but she’s just there. Being perky and happy and I’m usually so motherfucking twisted up and miserable. I don’t want to tell her anymore, and I don’t want to tell her to stay away. But I do. I want to tell her to not come around me, because it just twists a motherfucking knife into my nutritiousack and rips it out around my feet. Maybe that is me being some kind of jealous...”

“It’s okay,” she said soothingly. “That’s a perfectly normal reaction. What happened was terrible and unfair, it’s perfectly reasonable to wonder what made someone else so much luckier than you. It’s not your fault, or hers.”

“Everyone keeps saying it’s not my fault. It still motherfucking feels like it was. I look back and... fuck, I was so stupid. I got high on my own enough times, I should have noticed I was being drugged, at least. I guess I just didn’t wanna believe my bloodlinks would be so motherfucking sick.”

“‘Bloodlink’? I don’t think I’ve heard that term before.”

“I ain’t giving them the motherfucking honour of being called my parents,” he said bitterly.

“I understand, I just haven’t heard the term before. Par, tell me, would you rather have her out of your life?”

“I’d rather have everyone out my life most days. I just kind of want to be alone. I promised myself when I was still in there, when I got out I’d go see the beach. I lived by one when I was a wr- kid. But then I was around friends, I didn’t have nowhere else I could go... Then I was around her, and it’s hard. I can think of two... people I don’t want to vanish out my looksight. Three more who I’m okay with sometimes, but that’s really complicated. But everyone else just makes me angry and having to deal with it is hard. I can put on a friendly exterior but I just want to be alone most times. Shit thing is when I’m motherfucking alone they are all I can think about. I just keep going back there mentally, if I wait long enough I can get my thoughttray to shut up. Then it’s just empty.”

“Wanting isolation isn’t strange. Your mind thinks it would help, you could retreat inside yourself. The thing is, friends are around to support us. They want to help you, they want you to work through it, they want you to be happy again. If you pull back from that you’ll feel even more lonely.”

“I know, I was lonely when I was younger. No one paid much attention to me at the hive. I’m used to being alone. When I was younger I would have been hating to be alone more. I wanted to be surrounded and near others... But now, I want it back. I wish I could got back to the old goat ignoring me, and my friends thinking I was a fuckup for doing drugs. But also I don’t all want that. I want to be around them and I want to be happy. I’m so confused. I guess that’s being the reason I’m shoving my wicked words into your hearclots.”

“You know you can tell me anything, Par, I’m here to listen to whatever you have to say.”

“See, having a sister kind of bugs me. Because I think about if it could have been her. I don’t think she could have handled it. But like that isn’t what fully gets me about it. It’s the fact we are related
that gets me, because since I’ve seen her, I notice them in me, and them in her. Which leads me to think about…” He took a breath; obviously the words were difficult for him to say. “Other things.”

“It’s okay, Par, you can take your time if it’s hard to say. Sometimes things are very hard to say.” Deirdre tapped her pen on the paper. It didn’t make much noise, but it gave her something to do with her hands while he was silent on the other side of the line.

“The both of them were so strange,” he started slowly. She could tell he was half forcing himself to speak. “It was like it was their hobby. Like they had been having... kids to just make this happen. I know that sounds dumb but that’s what it was like. And I was caught up in it all messed up, like they would just be talking to me about things and say that they were going to put a samp--” His voice was cracking. “Fuck, this is difficult. She presented me with a … an option, to do it one way or another. I had to up and choose, I chose. I was starving, she offered me food... They would sit back and do things. She was the worst about it, she was really set on me doing things with her, and told me that I would make sure that it carried on. It’s weird y’know, because it might work. Then there would be some litt--... Fuck, fuck. I don’t know if this is getting out of my chatterbox and into your pan with any ease, but I can’t say it. I’m trying but I can’t.”

The plastic shell of the pen cracked in Deirdre Fallon’s hand. “Par…” She said slowly, she didn’t know what to say. It was one thing to molest and rape a child. That was twisted, and wrong. It was another thing to tell that same child he could choose whether or not he’d could eat based on if he’d attempt to procreate with you. That was new to her. She felt ill, she was sure she looked flush from fever. “It’s okay, you don’t have to force yourself to say things if you’re not ready.”

"A-and the worst part... They're still out there somewhere, and I don't know what they might be doing to someone else." She heard him sniffling. "If... if there is another... motherfuck, I don't know, she won't have it yet and it'll be safe till it's big enough not to outright die when they..."

“Par, Par.” She had never felt like such a terrible therapist in her life. She didn’t know what to say to comfort, there was no way she could reassure. If there was a child, she didn’t doubt it would happen again. Monsters don’t change on their own. “I wish there wasn’t so much distance between us,” she admitted. “I know you are very opposed to touching, but I wish I could be with you and tell you it would be okay.”

He let out a little laugh. “I don’t think if you saw me you’d be saying the same thing. I’d look like a monster to you.”

“I don’t think you would look like a monster.” He snorted in laughter, but said nothing. “You know, Par, you could always try to press charges. The law might be surprisingly helpful to calming you and helping you know that it won’t happen again.”

“I don’t think the law would do anything to them...” There was a moment of silence, and Deirdre was pretty sure he was trying not to laugh. “It’s kind of hard to explain like this. But... Let’s just say, the law doesn’t care about motherfuckers like me. Fuck it... I mean, why not?” He started to giggle, sounding eerie. “You wanna know the real reason I can’t go outside? It ain’t because of them.”

“I would like the real reason, I always want honesty. Why can’t you go outside?”

“I’m not actually human.” He just said it. Not quickly like he was afraid of admitting it, or like it was a lie. It sounded like a fact. “My friends and I are from a planet called Alteria, we crash-landed here a while ago. We’re living with some really nice humans. They set this up for me because what I said is still all being true. They want to help me.”

“I see,” she said, picking up another pen. She started writing notes. “Tell me; to you, how did it
really happen?”

“I was conscripted, like all of us are at eight sweeps, which is about eighteen years on Earth. I got taken in by my bloodlink who I shouldn’t have met at all. But he took me in and all the shit started. Then I found out his... I don’t really know how to easily explain this, but his best-friend-and-partner came in. I found out then they were both my bloodlinks. See what would be my ‘dad’ is her leashed dog, he’s the head peacekeeper of the Empire. Like a general, but it’s a bit different, he also runs around with the Carnival, leading that too. My ‘mom’ is the Empress, she’s a twisted fucking bitch. She’s the reason the empire is as fucked as it is. When we ran, Faith was trying to get away too, because if she went to see our ‘mom’ she’d have to face her in combat. To fight for the throne.”

“I see, so your sister is like a princess?”

“Something like that.”

“Are you a prince, then?”

“It doesn’t work that way on Alternia.” Deirdre nodded, even though he couldn’t see it. “The only thing I’m heir to is the Makara name, and my sign. My ancestor I think would have had me be something in the Carnival if I wasn’t such a fuckup in his eyes. He seemed happy the way I painted my face when he met me. Shit, that could have been another lie. I don’t even know.”

“Is this what you’ve seen, Par?” She asked slowly.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me," He sighed. She could tell how defeated he sounded. No doubt others had talked to him about this and called him crazy for seeing it. She had to be really careful here, she didn’t want to suffer any setbacks.

"I believe that that's what you saw," she said carefully. “I know people who have been through severe trauma have often seen things that other people would think are strange.” She wrote the word “hallucinations” in her notes. “Okay. Describe what these... Alternians look like for me?” She expected to be told they looked exactly like humans, or to hear a description of the traditional little bug-eyed grey things.

“Uh, sort of a bit like humans, we got the two legs, two arms, and a head at the top. But some of the adults are much bigger. Like, if I hadn’t been drugged all my life I’d be a couple heads taller than a human, and once we pupate some of us make twice the size.”

Deirdre wrote as she listened. Large size - obviously threatening. G = small = vulnerable. Pupation insectile; disgust at self?

“Anything else? Or is that just what they look like?”

“No, humans are all brown and earth colored. We have grey skin, not like the things in your human alien movies. I don’t think I look slimy. Humans have all kinds of hair. Ours is always black. Except for when the blood gets into it. Then it’s whatever our blood colour is. We got claws and fangs, not like humans have teeth and nails. But like legit ones. Uh, mine had to grow back. Bloodlinks fucked ‘em up. Horns on our head, um. There are some other differences, but I ain’t going to go into them unless you ask about them specifically. That gets real close to another conversation that’s real hard for me.”

Utilitarian (all one race, only one haircolor) - not too much detail to keep track of. Claws, fangs, horns; defenses lost, regained now in safety. Blood colour?

“Blood colour?”
“Yeah, it varies - that’s what shows our rank. Empresses are pink. The Makara line’s pretty high up, we’re purple.”

*Purple and pink - feminine colours. Sexuality-related shame?* She chewed her lip thoughtfully. He had mentioned a boyfriend, and some things he’d said about what his father had said to him... yeah, that sounded like the obvious symbolism. *Sister outranks him; connected? Self-esteem issues? Envy?*

“Anything else, Par? Or is that what Alternians look like?”

“That is what we are looking like, I can’t think of nothing else really different, other than that one thing I won’t talk about. I was told I shouldn’t mention it anyway, I mean I wasn’t supposed to talk about any of this. But that was a specific request. If you gots questions I can tune my thinkpan to answering them for you... But just for your record, we aren’t Alternians, we go by Troll. Like you all aren’t Earthians, we aren’t Alternians, humans and trolls respectively.”

*Troll* = ugly, hides in darkness? Sister expected to fight mother - link to insectile traits, wish for revenge, wants her support? Sister heir to the throne - jealous?

“Is there anything you want to tell me about being a troll, Par? Or is this all you want to say?”

“I still don’t think you believe me, but I guess it does sound pretty weird. If I were you I don’t know if I’d believe it. But since we knew about ‘aliens’ I guess I can’t say much because we all knew about them since we were hatched.”

“I do believe that you saw it,” she said again. “Do you feel you may have been seeing things that weren’t there? No, don’t take this the wrong way, I’m not saying I think you’re making this up. But you did say they drugged you. And it’s not unknown for people in terrible situations to... subconsciously change the facts. I wouldn’t even say that much, but you do sound like you think it wasn’t quite real.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you. How’s that gonna help me?”

“I know.”

“Well, I saw a lot of shit I don’t know was real. I talked to the ghosts of the kids they had in that cage before me. There were a lot. Our blood colours live a real motherfucking long time.”

Deirdre tapped her pen on the paper, before she knew exactly what to write. Ghosts - long life. It didn’t fully capture her thoughts but she could get more expressive later as she worked through it when she still wasn’t on the line with Gaspar.

“Y’know, I know the drug they put me on. I don’t think I ever saw anything like that on it before. Only colors and light. It couldn’t have been what you said, about changing the facts, but I think those ghosts are still with me. My friend says she can all feel them. So I don’t know if they are real or a lie. But like the other motherfucking shit I tossed at you, that isn’t a lie. I got no reason to be lying about shit like that.”

“I understand, it’s your truth, and that is what matters. I’m glad you told me. I can’t help you if I don’t understand the whole story.” She tried to find a way to put it into words. “Even if you don’t think it was really real, it may not have been the drugs, or entirely the drugs. Sometimes, when something terrible happens, or rather if someone does something terrible, the person it happened to doesn’t want to believe it happened, so they might remember it happening differently. Like, the ghosts. I won’t say they didn’t exist, but if they didn’t, you really needed to talk to someone who would understand, so...” He seemed more convinced about not being human, so she didn’t comment
on that. The symbolism was obvious; young victims sometimes subconsciously preferred to believe in monsters than accept that their parents would hurt them, though usually the ones who convinced themselves so strongly were a lot younger than Gaspar. Convincing themselves that they themselves were also not human was unusual, but he’d said he felt like a monster after he lashed out at his friends (accidentally hospitalised a boy called Eric, she remembered), so his mind made him into a literal one.

“So you reckon I made them up?”

“Don’t take this wrong, I’m not saying you’re wrong, or that you’re insane. Sometimes this kind of thing happens, and it might help to know you’re not the only one if that is what’s going on.” She twirled the pen in her fingers, ready to see if he had anything else he really wanted to talk about. Gaspar went between not needing prompting and needing it.

He sighed, and began to speak without a prompt. “I don’t know really if any of this is helping, I mean talking about it again I’m sure is supposed to be helpful, but like I don’t know how slightly lying about it helped. I want to get over it and get it gone. But I don’t even know if this will change the fact of how I am growing. I’m scared of growing up any more. I can already see me in the future being just like them. I don’t want it to happen. But I can see it. I’m half tempted to make myself never pupate, but that shit scares me too. But you know, maybe it won’t matter,” she heard him say, faint noises which might have been sobs or laughs bursting between his words. “Because they’re coming after me.”

“What do you mean? Have they tried to contact you?”

“No, we’re past contacting. I was made an offer and I refused it. I won’t be talking to them again until they’re here, ready for a fight. I know they are getting closer too... I don’t know if I’m ready to face them, I don’t think anyone in the universe is ready to face them. I’m terrified of seeing them again and freezing, last time I heard him talk I couldn’t force myself to do anything really. It wasn’t until he brought my friends into it I could...” He sighed, his voice was heavy on the other line. Drenched in sobs or laughter. Though Deirdre knew if it was laughter it was nervous laughter. Laughter to cover up fear. “What do I do when I face them? I don’t really care... It’s funny, I don’t really care if they sink their claws into me and tear me apart again. They can, as long as they leave my friends and the rest of Earth alone. But I know they wouldn’t so I do care if they take me and make me unable to defend all this - shit, this sounds terrible, and I’m sure it makes no full sense..”

“No, no, it makes sense. You’re afraid they’re coming to find you, and that they’re going to hurt your loved ones?”

Obvious paranoia.

“They and everyone else.” He was definitely laughing now, sounding more insane than he ever had. “If we lose they’re gonna blow this planet into motherfucking dust. I’m so sorry, Ms Fallon. I’m sorry we brought them here.”

Deirdre flicked back through her notes to find Dr Lalonde’s number. If she was legally responsible for Gaspar now, for whatever reason, maybe she could help persuade him to rethink the idea of some short-term medication.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!