the sun coming through

by ralseicore

Summary

You're not sure what to expect when you go to college out of state, in a place that you've never been to before and where you only know one person. Awkwardness, definitely, and a little bit of homesickness, too. Falling in love with your internet buddy's best friend that you kind of hate, not so much, but somehow it happens anyway.

Or: Dave and Karkat fall in love, from both of their perspectives.
Chapter 1

You sway slightly on your feet as the metro car rattles on down the tracks. You haven’t yet gone underground, and you watch as the scenery moves away, facing backwards, looking backwards.

Mid-morning on a Tuesday, the car was empty save for you and Kanaya. She sits in the privacy of the end of the car, sectioned off behind glass. You stand nearby, in front of the doors like you’re not supposed to. With how you look, though, people might think you didn’t even know each other.

You have one hand clutching a metal pole, cool and sturdy under your touch, the other loosely wrapped around the handle of your suitcase.

Bringing luggage on the metro was a special kind of nightmare, but neither you or Kanaya exactly have the means to drive to the airport, so nightmare it was.

The car rattles more violently, then plunges into darkness. You open your jaw to pop your ears.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Kanaya asks. She had her eyes glued to her phone the whole ride so far, putting it away only now because there’s no wifi to connect to underground.

“Why don’t you go fuck your-” you start to mumble, anger burning out like a fuse. You can’t actually be mad at her.

You can only see your own reflection in the windows now. Thick, dark brows drawn together in general grumpiness, shockingly black hair sticking out all over against olive skin. Watching highway scenery change so abruptly into your own self is always jarring. You sigh and join Kanaya in the back of the car. She pulls out a book.

“Do you want to transfer at Metro Center or Gallery Place? If we take the yellow line we’ll be treated to a wonderful view over the river.”

“I literally don’t give a shit.” You spit in response.

Kanaya only sighs. You feel your jaw get tight and you briefly imagine your fist connecting with the glass divider in from of you. You take a deep breath.

“Are you getting angry?” Kanaya asks patiently. “I know of some breathing exercises that might help.”

“Fuck no, I’m fine.” You say, at exactly the same time the metro car beeps and tells the passengers that the doors are opening.

A few people pile into the car. You sit in silence until Gallery Place.

After transferring, you absently watch the river with your head pressed against the glass of the window.

And just like that, you’re at the airport.

“I suppose that wasn’t so bad.” Kanaya says as you enter.

You grunt in response as you drag your suitcase behind her. It had stuck in the ticket gate for a few seconds while you made your way through.
The Reagan airport was an unusual looking building, quite small and made up of glass and high domed ceilings and mosaic floors. A few shops display obnoxiously patriotic souvenirs, and you wonder what kind of asshole would actually wear a t-shirt that says ‘GOD BLESS THE USA’ on it.

“You’re sure you’ll be okay, Karkat?” Kanaya asks, just as it’s time to say goodbye. “You don’t have to do this, you know, leaving us all behind for school.”

“Don’t act like everyone’s not beside themselves with joy now that I’m finally fucking off to college.” You reply.

Kanaya sighs, and you think you sense her patience wearing thin. “Call me when you get there, okay?”

“Uh huh,” you mumble. You swallow anxiously and wonder if she can tell how nervous you suddenly are. You’ve never been on an airplane by yourself, and no matter how many times you went over what to do, you are sure you will find some way to fuck it up. She’s like a sister to you, she knows these things.

Kanaya hugs you goodbye, giving you a reassuring pat on the back as she envelops you with her tall frame, and just like that, you’re leaving pretty much your only family behind in DC, headed west in an airborne metal tube.

On the other side of the country is a school and a dorm room waiting for you. The only person you know in the state is some asshole kid named John who you played games with online. By coincidence you ended up applying to the same school in Seattle, go figure.

As annoying as you found the guy, you are genuinely glad that there’s a familiar face waiting for you where you’re going.

The things you left behind include, but are not limited to: Kanaya, your useless father, your high school crush, your best friends, the townhouse you grew up in, and-

You realize that you left your phone in your old room when the plane is already landing. A flight attendant catches you biting your own shirt and asks if you’re okay.

The first thing you do at the Sea-Tac airport is go into the men’s room and lock yourself in one of the stalls. The second thing you do is start crying, in the ugliest, most angry way possible.

“I’m such a stupid fucking idiot,” you say into an airport pay phone. “I fucked up before I even left home, and I didn’t even know it. I fucked up by even thinking I could handle coming here.” You feel like a child, and the words falling out of your mouth are mortifying.

Kanaya says something on the other line about sending your phone to you, but it’s hard to listen with the ringing in your ears and tears stinging at your eyes.

Eventually you at least manage to get your luggage, and Kanaya says that your phone will be shipped in the morning. It’s enough to make you not want to scream anymore, but so far, this whole college thing isn’t going well.

A shuttle takes you from the airport to the city. You watch the buildings go by, far taller than the ones in DC, until you reach the university.

Your dorm room is a single. You have to admit that you did get very lucky there, but the room itself is pretty cramped and on the third floor. A small window overlooks the campus but doesn’t do much to let in any light. You flick the switch and a bright bulb illuminates the space, far brighter than it had
any business being.

The first thing you should do is set up your bed with your own blanket and sheets, or maybe take a minute to introduce yourself to your new neighbors. The reality is, though, that the first thing you do at college is take out your laptop and connect to the internet.

Priorities.

-- ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 17:32 --

EB: hi karkat!
EB: you get here yet? :D
CG: UGH.
CG: YES I’M HERE AND I’M IN NO MOOD TO TALK TO SOME PEPPY FUCKER SO, IF YOU WOULD, KINDLY FUCK OFF?
EB: haha, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.
EB: if you’re here then we should just meet “in real life” as they say!
CG: I HAVE HAD AN ABSOLUTE SHITFEST OF A DAY SO FAR, SO THE ONLY THING I PLAN ON DOING FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE IS LIE FACE DOWN ON THE FLOOR WHILE SCREAMING, FOR AS LONG AS I CAN.
CG: MAYBE I’LL SET A RECORD, AND ACTUALLY MAKE SOMETHING OF MYSELF.
CG: KARKAT VANTAS: HOLDER OF THE WORLD RECORD FOR LONGEST TIME SPENT BEING AN INSUFFERABLE SCREAM MACHINE.
EB: oh come on!
EB: don’t be such a douche, come say hi!
EB: my friend dave is here too
EB: he’s a really cool guy, we’re having so much fun over here being cool friend guys.
CG: SORRY, CAN’T HEAR YOU OVER MY FLOOR SCREAMING.
EB: ;)
EB: get off the floor and come hang out with us, dick head!
CG: NO
CG: MY FACE IS FIRMLY PLANTED INTO THIS HIDEOUS AND UNFORTUNATELY TEXTURED CARPET
CG: I WILL NOT MOVE AND I WILL NOT STOP SCREAMING AND I WILL *NOT* COME HANGOUT AND BE A COOL FRIEND GUY.
EB: you’re not on the floor and you’re not screaming, or else i don’t know how you’re pestering me right now!
EB: if you want to spend the rest of the day throwing a tantrum then i guess i won’t stop you.
EB: but you better believe that first thing tomorrow morning we’re gonna hang out like a couple of best guy friends!
EB: plus dave, plus your choice of crappy off brand cafeteria cereal.
CG: WOW. SOUNDS LIKE A GOOD TIME.
EB: ;P
EB: i gotta go, but pester me if you change your mind about your scream session!
CG: CHANCES OF THAT ARE SLIM.
EB: hehe
EB: bye karkat!
CG: YEAH, BYE.

-- ectoBiologist [EB] ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 17:53 --

You shut your laptop. Floor screaming does sound like an attractive use of your time, but you instead settle on making your bed and unpacking your clothes.
Some time later, you’re dressed in only a pair of boxers and an over-sized sweatshirt, curled up on the bed in the dark with your laptop open next to you. The most comfortable you’ve been all day.

Pesterchum is still open, running in the background while you watch-

You’re watching a shitty rom-com instead of talking to your friends back home, but you do you, I guess.

You briefly consider getting back to John, or pestering Terezi. You know Sollux wanted to hear about your new school, maybe you could talk to him. Instead you fall asleep, at some indeterminate time between the beginning and the end of your movie.

The sun is rising.

The light is just barely tinging the room with its pale glow when someone knocks at the door.

You jolt out of bed, nearly sending your laptop over the edge. You’re still sort of in between sleeping and waking and you stumble over to the door. The only thing that registers in your brain at this point is that a) you’re really fucking annoyed, and b) you have no idea who is on the other side of the door.

When you open it you realize, belatedly, that you should have known it was going to be Egbert all along.

“Karkat!” He exclaims, and you recognize him immediately. That goofy grin, those glasses and dark hair. It’s John alright. It’s who he has with him is still a mystery at this point, but you guess that it’s probably ‘Dave.’

‘Dave’ stands outside your door with John, as if it was absolutely his business to be doing so. As if he wasn’t some random fucking asshole intruding on your personal space.

The first thing you notice is the shades. John has not only brought with him a douchebag, but a douchebag who wears sunglasses indoors. The second thing is the shockingly white hair framing his face. Freckles. Third is freckles. That’s the third thing you notice, that he has freckles dotted all over his skin.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” You say abruptly, mouth moving on its own, as it does. “How did you know where my dorm was?”

“I have my ways,” John says with an exaggerated wink. You raise your brow. “I, uh, just asked the RA if a Karkat lived on this floor.”

He gestures down the hall with his thumb. “Dave and I live down there. Oh, right, this is Dave.”

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” you say.

You realize that you’re still wearing nothing but a pair of boxers and an over-sized sweatshirt.

Down in the dining hall, you’re still unsure of what to make of this guy. John is making you eat what tastes like cardboard and marshmallows in milk. Talking to him in real life is almost exactly like talking to him online. He goes on and on with his corny jokes, you call him colorful insults, just as it was intended.
You don’t say so, but it’s relieving as hell to have this whole ‘meeting John’ thing out of the way.

Dave, meanwhile, wears an infuriatingly blank expression and eats nothing, instead sipping at a bottle of apple juice.

“So what was up with you last night?” John asks after a lull in the conversation.

“Yeah, what the fuck.” Dave pipes in. “John wanted me to meet you but he said you were screaming at your floor.”

“I-” You start, embarrassment starting to creep on your back. “I was having a bad day.”

John laughs. “Good old Karkat, always at it with his freak outs.” You resist the urge to tell him to shut the fuck up.

“I’ll have you know, John, that I traveled about 2500 miles away from home before realizing I didn’t have my phone, so excuse me if I wasn’t in a great mood.”

“Oh man, that sucks dude!” John says with a laugh. “That was pretty dumb of you, huh?”

You don’t say anything, the conversation having moved into ‘this is pissing you off’ territory. As if it wasn’t bad enough, you had to be reminded of how much of a stupid asshole you are.

Thankfully for you, it’s time for another character to enter the scene.

“Oh, hey, Rose!” John says. You look up, and at the edge of the table is a young woman wearing black and an amused expression. Same unnaturally white hair as Dave. “Karkat, this is Dave’s sister, Rose. Rose, this is my friend Karkat.”

She nods at you and doesn’t seem hostile, so you regard her in the same manner. In her arms is an intimidatingly tall stack of books, and there looked to be more in her bag, a knitted, lavender colored thing that looked handmade. “Nice to meet you.”

“Are there any other friends of yours that are going to impose upon my morning?” You ask John, and you swear you hear Rose laugh before she sits to join the three of you.

“Well, there’s Jade, but I think she’s sleeping right now!” he says. “Man, this is so weird, though. Before yesterday, I only knew all you guys on the internet!”

“Is it really that weird, though?” Rose asks, voice low and steady. “I think it feels fairly natural so far, all things considered.”

Silently, you have to agree.

==> Be Dave.

When you wake up, there is a split second of terror before your brain registers where you are. You are in your dorm room, and John is still asleep in his own bed. Your phone says it’s 5 in the morning. You place the blame on the fact that you’re in a new time zone, but the truth is, violently jolting out of a peaceful sleep at the slightest sound is commonplace.

Your heart races in your chest and you are wide awake. Great.

Mornings like these call for your headphones and the ‘chill’ tag on the 8tracks app. Not that it actually helps you chill out, you just like the music. You let it play quietly into your ears and take a deep breath.
For the first time in your life you are away from home, and you don’t feel how you expected to feel.

You look over at John. You’re in a building full of strangers, rooming with an internet friend you’ve never met in person until yesterday. Despite this, you are eerily calm.

An hour passes before you’re bored enough to poke John awake.

“So, we’re just going to go hang out with this shouty asshole?” You ask as John drags you out of the room. “First thing in the morning?”

John laughs, and man, is it weird to experience that in person after hearing it so many times over Skype. Not that you haven’t had your fill of first-hand Egbert giggles already, but it still strikes you as odd.

“Dude, Karkat is really cool once you get to know him!” He shuts the door behind him and locks it, room key hanging off a purple lanyard. “I actually think you two will get along really well.”

You’re not sure what to think of that, considering that your only knowledge of this guy so far is that he and John have some sort of pseudo-antagonistic relationship and that he prefers screaming alone in his room to socializing.

“Do you even know what this guy looks like? Like what if he’s some middle aged fuck catfishing you on Steam?”

John rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I know what he looks like, duh. I actually think he’s like a year younger than us? Or half a year? Anyways…” John trails off as you follow him down the hall.

“You don’t know where to find this guy, do you?”

“Nope!” John says, hands placed on his hips. “But come on, I bet we can figure it out.” There’s that goofy grin again, those teeth sticking out in a hella endearing way. John is pretty adorable in person, you have to admit.

John ends up just pestering the resident assistant about it, and you find out that Karkat is down the hall from your own room. All that going up and down stairs for nothing.

The guy that answers the door does so in a way that definitely indicates, to you at least, that this is indeed John’s Karkat. John greets him cheerfully and he swears at him, which you kind of expected. What you didn’t expect was…

You weren’t expecting…

The guy who answers the door is wearing a baggy sweater and a pair of grey boxers. Like, he’s literally in his underwear. And he’s shorter than you, you notice that right away. He’s actually really short, maybe around 5’2” or less. His hair is jet black and a mess, his eyebrows thick and expression belligerent. You’re not looking there, though. You’re looking at his legs, and-

See, it’s guys like that that make you go ‘oh, right, definitely, probably not straight.’ As soon as that thought runs through your head you shoot it down, like a particularly big and fat quail just barely trespassing on your periphery.

John introduces you.

“Hey,” you say.
“Hey,” he says.

You have to wait for him to actually dress himself before heading down to the dining hall. He comes out as if he’d only just put sweatpants on over his boxers. Which, yeah, you can’t blame him. John woke him up early because you woke John up early, and you woke up early because you’re from two hours in the future and a light sleeper on top of that.

John makes good on his promise of cafeteria cereal, making Karkat eat shitty Lucky Charms, sorry, you mean ‘frosted toasted oats and marshmallows,’ and getting ‘frosted fruit rings’ himself.

You stick with AJ. Can’t go wrong with that.

You mostly sit back while they go on with their own conversation. You can tell that they’re friends underneath the insults and the general grumpiness of the other guy. You wonder if that’s just how he is all the time, or if he’s not at all a morning person.

Rose joins the three of you, and John introduces her as your sister. Technically speaking, yeah. But sister in the sense that you grew up in the same household? Well, no.

Rose lived on the east coast with her mom. You lived in Texas with your bro. How that arrangement happened, you’re not entirely sure. But you think that maybe Rose’s mom isn’t very fond of your bro, or that they maybe had a falling out years ago.

Regardless, the two of you are here together, going to the same school in the pacific northwest, a place neither of you have ever been to.

Rose mentioned once that that was what was so enticing about all of it: the unknown. Being away from home for the first time, the call of adventure and the thirst for knowledge drawing you from placidity of childhood. You called her pretentious, but secretly agreed.

It was scary, but so far, this whole college thing was going pretty okay.

===> Be Karkat.

Seattle has yet to prove itself as the gloomy, rainy greyscape you were imagining. Okay, so late August wasn’t typically a rain-filled month, but with the way people were talking you half expected to never see the sun again.

It was nice, you guess. Definitely less humid than Maryland, and there wasn’t the constant, distant chirp of crickets and frogs in the distance either.

John wants to show you around. You don’t really feel like walking around all day, but you follow him around campus regardless. Dave tags along, all lanky and walking with his hands shoved into his pockets, always a few steps behind. What is this guy’s deal, exactly?

There are so many trees where you’re walking, you notice that right away. And a few of these buildings look old, almost castle like. You’ve seen pictures of the campus before, but walking it is entirely different. Your feet already hurt by 10:00.

The three of you are standing in front of a massive, circular and shallow fountain.

“Well, what now?” John asks after a minute of silence. You and Dave haven’t exactly been matching his enthusiasm this morning.

“Can we go into this thing?” Dave asks, placing his foot on the fountain’s edge. “I mean, I already
know we’re not supposed to, but shit, look at this.”

You look at it. It’s large and flat and sorely tempting in the late summer heat.

“No fountain-related shenanigans today, guys.” John starts to walk away.

“Can we at least take a break?” you ask. “We’ve been walking around all fucking morning.”

Dave sits down at the fountain edge. “Yeah, I gotta agree. My feet are hella sore, dude.”

“Fine,” John sighs. You sit down next to Dave, and for a short moment it’s just the two of you while you wait on John.

Dave laughs softly, and it feels weirdly intimate, because you’re pretty sure you’re the only one who can hear. “John’s pretty excited about all of this, all running around trying to show us out-of-towners his city.”

“Yeah,” you say. “So you’re not from here either, then?”

“Nah, Texas.” he says lazily, looking up at the sky.

After a couple minutes, John once again starts dragging the two of you across campus. You share a couple looks with Dave, feeling solidarity in how exhausted you both are at the end of the day.

You are just thinking that this guy isn’t so bad when he does something to royally piss you off.

You stand with John outside the library, waiting for him to decide if you should go in or not. The building is grand and a bit intimidating, but you’d be lying if you said you didn’t want to see the inside. You feel a weight press down on your shoulder. You turn your head and realize it’s Dave’s elbow.

He’s leaning on you, more specifically, using you as an armrest. You give him your best scowl.

“What?” he asks plainly. “Not my fault you’re the perfect height for this.”

You jerk away, causing him to stumble and getting a laugh from John. You smirk as he rights himself, adjusting his glasses and hair. He’s back to his cool guy self in an instant, however.

“Why are you so short, anyway? Fuck’s up with that?” he asks. The rational part of you knows that he was just teasing, wasn’t really expecting an actual answer.

The sensitive part of you short-circuits and you can’t stop yourself from yelling “None of your fucking business!”

Both John and Dave are taken aback by your outburst. A few passersby give you strange looks.

It takes John a few moments to register what Dave said and why that might’ve pissed you off. You can practically see the ‘LOADING…’ text on his face before realization strikes.

Thankfully for you, John has always been good at lightening the mood and changing the subject.

You told him months ago, over a Skype call well into the night. About how you weren’t really ‘born’ a guy, language you hated to use but you weren’t sure how else to explain it to him. He had a lot of questions and you tried not to scream the answers the at him. In the end, it changed nothing about your relationship.
When you learned you’d be attending the same college, you made him swear not to say a word about you being trans to anyone, and so far he’s made good on that promise.

You spend the rest of the day low-key fuming at Dave, and just when you think you’re over it, he joins in with John mocking you for liking Good Luck Chuck when you were laughing at John for liking National Treasure.

Because when you and John call each other assholes and make fun of each other, it’s fair game. But some guy you only just met today shitting on your taste in movies and mocking you for your height, on top of you being hungry and tired, is the opposite of okay.

You hide away in your room with instant noodles and watch another rom-com for good measure. Who cares what hipster douchebags think, anyways? Ugh, did your internal monologue seriously just say the phrase 'hipster douchebags'?

You get a notification from your instant messenger.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] has requested to be your chum! --

TG: hey its dave

You take a deep breath and stare angrily at the ceiling for a moment before accepting.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] and turntechGodhead [TG] are now chums! --

CG: WHAT DO YOU WANT?
TG: john told me to add you
TG: whats up
CG: FUCK OFF, I’M BUSY.
TG: wow you really do always type in all caps huh
CG: AND YOU TYPE LIKE AN ASSHOLE THAT DOESN’T KNOW HOW TO TAKE A HINT.
CG: I’M EATING WHAT PASSES FOR ‘DINNER’ IN COLLEGE AND WATCHING A ‘SHITTY MOVIE’ SO GO PESTER SOMEONE ELSE.
TG: ok lol ill try again when youre not so hangry
CG: HANGRY.
TG: yeah youre hungry and angry
TG: hangry
TG: see its those words combined

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 18:46 --

TG: lol rude

You don’t really feel bad for going offline. Right now, all you really feel like doing is shoving cheap noodles into your face, so that’s what you do.

You pass out almost immediately after ‘dinner’ so that’s the end of your day, you guess.

==> Be Dave.

You can’t help but laugh when this guy goes offline. You have a feeling that you’re going to have a hell of a time messing with him this year.

You lie on your bed with your laptop open on your stomach. Your side of the dorm is visually
sectioned off from John’s by your taste in decorating. Red and black and shitty ironic posters on one side, bright and blue and cheesy movies on the other. Living in such close quarters with another person is an entirely new experience, and you’re not really sure what to think.

John is taking his time in the shower.

You only ever lived with your brother. And he was only ever around less than half the time. You missed out on a genuine sibling experience with Rose living so far away. You look over at John’s bed.

Someone is pestering you.

-- tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 18:57 --

TT: Dave you’ve been offline all day what on earth have you been up to?
TG: ive been up to john dragging my entire ass around this entire campus
TG: along with his weird ornery as fuck friend
TG: where did this guy come from again
TT: Karkat?
TT: I’m not sure, I can’t say I know him any better than you.
TT: In fact, you’re probably more knowledgeable on this particular subject, loath as I am to admit it.
TG: admit what that i know some asshole better than you
TG: am i bruising youre massive fuckin ego
TT: *Your.
TT: And yes, you know me. I absolutely despise the prospect of anyone at any point in time knowing more than me about a thing.
TG: whats got you so facetious today jeez
TG: did jade ever wake up btw
TT: Yes, she’s awake presently.
TT: We’re both sitting silently in our room on our respective laptops.
TT: It’s quite cozy, actually.
TT: And not because my laptop quite literally is wearing a cozy.
TG: this whole sharing a room thing is really weird though tbh
TG: like john is awesome but
TG: shit isnt super cozy so far and honestly im kind of uncomfortable
TT: Understandable, considering your upbringing.
TG: my upbringing
TT: Well, your homelife was never very healthy or normal.
TG: uh
TG: what

Your hand hovers over the keyboard, fingers twitching over what else to say. You swallow anxiously as you watch the ‘typing’ symbol aside Rose’s handle.

TT: I imagine the environment you were raised in stunted your emotional growth in a number of ways.
TT: You’re not particularly equipped to handle any sort of intimacy, such as the sort that arises with sharing a small space with someone for weeks.
TG: intimacy
TG: dont make it sound gay jesus rose
TG: like ok yeah maybe ive never shared a room with someone but still like
TG: what the fuck do you mean not healthy or normal
TG: rose?
TT: I’m just saying.
TG: yeah just talking shit more like
TG: anyways john just got back ttyl
TG: and tell jade i said hi
TT: Will do.


You close your laptop. John is, in fact, not back yet. You just wanted a reason to cut the conversation short.

You feel transparent; you’re pretty sure that Rose can always see through you, even through words a screen.

Your brain wants to turn over Rose’s words in your head until you fall asleep. Instead, you pull on your good headphones and turn up your music until you can’t even hear your subconscious.

When you wake up, it’s not the calm blanket of early morning light that does it, or anything else that would be considered a normal way to wake up. You still have your headphones on, still have music blaring into your ears. Your face is covered in whipped cream.

When you take off your headphones there’s the unmistakable sound of John laughing hysterically.

“How long were you waiting to do something like that?” You ask groggily. John just laughs harder, and it’s contagious. You clean up with a spare towel and throw it at him when you’re done.

Okay, time to go to sleep, for real this time. It’s around 11pm.

It’s around 3am.

You can’t sleep no matter what you do.

You wonder what the words ‘healthy’ and ‘normal’ are even supposed to mean.
Chapter Notes

content warnings for: gender dysphoria, unintended misgendering

==> Be Karkat.

The first day of classes is, for the most part, very uneventful. It’s strangely cold in the morning, which you think might be a west coast thing. You pull on a black sweatshirt over a grey tee.

The grey tee goes over a white binder, cropped just under your rib cage and pressing down on your flesh. You look in the mirror, unable to stop yourself from scrutinizing every detail.

You’re registered as a male student. This is going to go better than high school, because only one of thousands of students here knows about you being trans. Which is entirely different than trying to graduate as a boy with an entire school district that knew you as a girl for ten years. You remind yourself firmly of these facts.

You catch your reflection in a passing window and take a deep breath. You see your legs reflected in a glass door as you enter the building and clench your teeth.

So far all you’ve done is walk to your first class and you’re already mad.

Which means that you’re not exactly in the mood when you find out that Dave is in your English class.

He’s sitting next to a girl with long hair and large, round glasses. He spots you and waves you over. You sigh heavily and join him, your anger making you drag your feet.

“Sup?” he says. He’s wearing the same shades as before, along with a red sweatshirt.

You grunt in response.

“This is John’s friend, Karkat.” Dave says, gesturing at you.

“Oh, hi! I’m Jade,” the girl says with a smile.

"Hey," you mumble to her. You take a seat on the other side of Dave.

“Come on, dude,” Dave says. “I talked you up as this legendarily ranty motherfucker and you don’t even say a word?”

You’re really not in the mood for this. You clamp your mouth shut.

Dave elbows you in the side. “Who pissed in your frosted fruit rings?” He says, and Jade giggles behind him.

“What the fuck do you want from me? Sorry I didn’t show up spitting out words in a blind rage, I didn’t realize I had to bring entertainment for the great Dave Strider and his girlfriend,” you huff.
The look he gives you makes you immediately regret your words. You see Jade flush bright red, but Dave looks wholly uncomfortable. And totally in the 'you just embarrassed me in front of my crush' way, you think. Behind his glasses you’re sure he’s giving you daggers.

A touchy subject, you guess. Judging by their reactions, there’s a bit of unspoken attraction going on here. You would know, what with how knowledgeable you are on the subject of romance.

==> Be Dave.

This is probably the most uncomfortable you’ve been in a very long while.

The immediate solution seems to be just pretending that you’re not even in this situation, or in this classroom, even. Nope, nothing to see here. Dave Strider? Who’s that? Not anyone you’ve ever heard of.

The professor has started talking, thank god. At least there’s that, you think as you sink a little bit into your chair.

The thing with Jade is, you’re pretty sure you did like her back, once upon a time. A version of you that existed a few years ago would’ve definitely dated her. And that version of you would’ve been making a mistake. Not because there's anything wrong with her, it's just, something feels off about the idea, something you can't quite put your finger on.

This is something you have only just started to realize, though. Being in the same place as a hypothetical would-be girlfriend for the first time in your life puts a lot of things into perspective.

Beside you, Karkat chews on a wooden pencil, eyebrows furrowed as he focuses intently ahead of him. You can see his canines; they’re sharp and white.

All you really have figured out right now is that you’d rather look at Karkat’s mouth than entertain the idea of having a girlfriend. The implications of which aren’t lost on you.

It’s just that when you start to think down that path your gut reaction is to derail yourself like a tragically misaligned gay express train with fucked up wheels speeding a hundred miles an hour down a broken track.

You decide to stop thinking about the mechanical failure of your self-discovery and decide to actually listen to the professor for the remainder of the class.

Afterwards, Jade hugs you goodbye and heads off towards the other side of the campus. Karkat leaves in another direction after telling you to fuck off and to not follow him. You’re left to your own devices for the next hour or so, you guess.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 10:04 --

TG: yo hows your first day of big boy school going
TG: because mine has been pretty boring and sort of awkward so far
EB: same, i guess.
EB: i’m in one of my big boy classes right now and i don’t know a single person, also i kind of have to pee.
TG: ooooh texting during class
TG: youre a real bad boy mr egbert
TG: and you realize that you can just get up and go to the bathroom now right
TG: like thats one of the things about college people always tell you
EB: yeah, well just up and leaving would be kind of rude, i think?
EB: anyways i’ll be out in a few minutes so what ever.
TG: this is such a riveting conversation oh man
TG: im on the edge of my seat
EB: :B
EB: what about you though?
EB: are you texting in class too, like a guy who is also a bad boy, mr. strider?
TG: oh man i forgot how dorky you are over text since weve been talking in person pretty much all the time now
TG: which is only marginally more than how dorky you are irl
TG: but yea no im not in class rn im hanging around by myself outside
TG: really just embracing the sad lonely asshole aesthetic right now
TG: got this shit down to a t
EB: wow, you sure sound busy!
TG: nah
TG: this shit is effortless as hell
TG: standing around with my phone out
TG: standing around with my hands in my pockets
TG: walking a little bit over there
TG: 100% pure genuine lonely college student antics all up in here
EB: well let me come join your sad guy party, after i go pee.
TG: no just come here straight away and piss your pants
TG: we can be the saddest sorriest fucks that ever stood around
TG: but you would be sadder and sorrier and i would seem cool by comparison
TG: but then again id just be the same asshole only now just standing next to a guy pissing himself
TG: which might be the saddest and sorriest a fuck can be
TG: im by that one fountain btw
EB: ok!
TG: ok what
TG: ok to the pants pissing or
EB: ok as in, i know where you are now, and i’m coming over there!
EB: :P
TG: did u pee though
EB: yes i did!! and stop talking about pee!


You put your phone in your pocket and stand around by yourself for just a couple minutes longer. You hear a door open and close, then footsteps behind you. You turn around, and lo and behold, there’s John waving at you as he approaches.

“Hey Dave!” he says. You offer him your fist, and he bumps you with his own in return.

The two of you decide to find some cheap food to eat, since there’s not really anything else to do.

“So have you heard from Rose today?” John asks as you share poorly cooked cafeteria fries.

You drag a fry through a puddle of ketchup, watching the sad excuse for food flop around in your grip. “Man, fuck Rose.”

John instantly looks taken aback. “Whoa, did something happen with you guys?” he asks, concern showing on his features.

“What?” you say, tone a bit lighter. “No, just, you know how she can be sometimes.”
John tilts his head to the side, but doesn’t press it further. “What about Jade? Don’t you guys have a class together?”

You nod. “Yeah, Karkat’s there too.”

John lets out a sigh as he leans back in his chair. “Man, that’s not fair, I wanna be in your cool English class.”

“There’s no such thing as a cool English class,” you deadpan, making John snort, and you can’t help but smile.

“So,” John says. “What do you think of Karkat?”

You raise your eyebrows, not really expecting John to ask something like that.

“He’s… something, ain’t he?”

John laughs loudly in response. “Yeah, but he’s cool, right?”

You shrug. “Yeah, he’s a bro. He’s so tiny though, what’s up with that?”

“Come on, Dave,” John says playfully. “He’s sensitive about things like that. Try not make fun of him, even though I know it’s really tempting.”

“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing,” you continue. “It’s kind of adorable, actually.”

As soon as the word ‘adorable’ leaves your mouth, you feel your face heat up under your shades. John cocks one of his eyebrows.

“Man, he would kill you if he heard you say that,” he says, laughing harder.

“Yeah, heh,” you say, trying to occupy yourself with a napkin.

Today is a day for awkward moments, you guess.

=> Be Karkat.

Your last class of the day is creative writing, and you’re pleasantly surprised to see Rose has this class as well.

She catches your eye, gesturing with a tilt of her head to the seat beside her, so you go and sit down.

“Karkat,” she says in greeting. “I was beginning to worry that my entire schedule consisted of classrooms full of complete strangers.”

You make a noncommittal noise. Rose doesn’t piss you off like most people, but you’re still not sure how to talk to her.

“Although,” she continues, “I suppose that’s what I should expect coming to a school on the opposite side of the country.”

“You too?” you ask, and she raises one of her brows.

“Yes, upstate New York. You?”

“Maryland,” you say. “Sort of by DC.”
She hums in response. You don’t say much more. Rose strikes you as the kind of person that you might one day have great conversations with, but for now, you sit quietly and struggle to think of anything to say.

Removing your clothes after a long day, or any day, really, and crawling into bed in your underwear and a big sweatshirt is one of (your frankly miserable) life’s pleasures.

You cough several times as you open up your laptop, mostly on purpose, as your body eases into not having a binder on anymore. Your ribs hurt, but so do your feet and your head. You let out a long sigh.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering grimAuxiliatrix [GA] at 17:14 --

CG: HEY.
CG: SORRY I HAVEN’T REALLY SAID HI OR ANYTHING SINCE GETTING HERE.
GA: Thats Quite Alright
GA: You Have Your Phone Now Though Right
CG: YEAH, I GOT IT. THANKS.
CG: SORRY FOR FLIPPING OUT AT YOU WHEN I REALIZED I DIDN’T HAVE IT.
GA: Thank You For Apologizing
GA: However I Am Fairly Accustomed To Your Emotional Outbursts By Now
GA: Its Only Been About Ten Years
CG: THAT JUST MAKES IT WORSE!
CG: YOU SHOULDN’T BE USED TO ME BEING AN OBNOXIOUS SHOUTY CRYBABY.
CG: BECAUSE I “SHOULDN’T” BE AN OBNOXIOUS SHOUTY CRYBABY, AND YET
CG: NO AMOUNT OF SELF AWARENESS HAS MADE ME LESS OF A PATHETIC GAPPING ASSHOLE.
CG: IF ANYTHING, TRYING TO FIX THIS IS ONLY MAKING IT WORSE.
GA: Stop It
CG: YEAH, I WISH I COULD!!!!
GA: No I Mean Stop Going Down This Winding Path Of Self Loathing
GA: You Are Not Any Of The Things Youre Saying You Are
GA: Well Except For The Crybaby Thing Sometimes
GA: But Your Emotional Sensitivity Is Enduring So Please Dont Try To Squash That Part Of You Like You Do Other Parts
CG: WHAT OTHER PARTS??
CG: AND DO YOU MEAN LITERALLY BECAUSE, IF SO, FUCK YOU??
GA: No I Am Not Talking About Your Chest That Was Unfortunate Phrasing
GA: Im Referring To How You Seem To Hate Literally Everything About Yourself
GA: When You Shouldnt Because A Lot Of Things About You Are Good
CG: FUCK.
CG: I JUST WANTED TO SAY HI NOT HAVE A MARIANA TRENCH OF A CONVERSATION.
GA: Im Sorry Should We Start Talking About Something Stupid And Forget All Of This
GA: Do You Want To Hear More About What Its Like Working In A Retail Fabric Store Because I Can Provide Plenty Of Anecdotes
CG: NO I JUST
CG: WELL, MAYBE.
CG: BUT I JUST WANT TO SAY THANKS I GUESS.
CG: FOR PUTTING UP WITH ME.
CG: I’M NOT GOING TO LIE AND SAY THAT I BELIEVE ANY OF THE THINGS YOU SAID, BECAUSE THAT’S JUST NOT HAPPENING ANYTIME SOON.
CG: BUT THANKS FOR SAYING IT, ANYWAYS.
GA: I Will Say Lots Of Things About You Until You Accept That They Are The Truth
GA: Are You Crying Right Now
CG: FUCK, KIND OF?
GA: See I Am Right About All Things Karkat Vantas
GA: In Continuing My Role As The Mom Friend I Will Now Ask You How Your Day At School Was
GA: Did You Make Any Friends
CG: WELL, I MET JOHN.
CG: PRETTY MUCH EXACTLY WHAT I EXPECTED.
CG: BUT HE HAS THIS FRIEND NAMED DAVE WHO IS A MASSIVE FUCKING DOUCHEBAG.
CG: EVERYTHING HE SAYS AND DOES PISSES ME OFF, EVEN HOW HE WALKS.
CG: HE’S SO TALL AND LANKY IT MAKES ME MAD. WHY THE FUCK IS HE ALL THE WAY UP THERE?
CG: AND HE WEARS SUNGLASSES ALL THE TIME AND DOESN’T KNOW WHAT GOOD MOVIES ARE.
GA: Am I Correct In Assuming That You Harbor Romantic Feelings For This Dave
CG: WHAT
CG: THE
CG: *ACTUAL* FUCK.
GA: I Will Take That As A Yes
CG: NO, YOU WILL TAKE IT AS THE ACTUAL THING IT WAS, WHICH IS, WHAT THE FUCK.
CG: I DON’T HAVE A CRUSH ON HIM I LITERALLY FUCKING HATE HIM, KANAYA.
GA: Whatever You Say
GA: I Just Think That When Youre Fixated On Someone You Tend To Ramble About Them
GA: Regardless Of Whether Or Not What Youre Saying Is Flattering Or Nice
GA: You Just Have This Innate Desire To Talk About Them Which Is Kind Of Cute
CG: GGGHDHPHPHPOK;’L
GA: Tell Me More About This Fellow Some Other Time When Your Fingers Work I Guess
GA: Did You Make Any Other Friends
CG: WELL JOHN KNOWS THESE TWO OTHER GIRLS, ROSE AND JADE.
CG: I DON’T REALLY KNOW JADE AT ALL BUT ROSE SEEMS OKAY.
CG: SHE SORT OF REMINDS ME OF YOU, ACTUALLY.
GA: Oh
GA: Is She Cute
CG: KANAYA.
GA: Sorry I Couldnt Help It
GA: There I Go Again With My Rampant Lesbianism
CG: I WILL ADMIT THAT SHE IS PRETTY.
CG: IN A SORT OF GOTHY KIND OF WAY THAT’S PROBABLY UP YOUR ALLEY.
CG: SHE’S ACTUALLY DAVE’S SISTER, I THINK THEY MIGHT BE TWINS?
GA: So Is Dave Pretty Too
CG: SHUT
CG: UP
CG: THAT’S NOT WHAT I MEANT!!
GA: I Know I Am Just Teasing You
GA: Anyways Can You Get Me Her Number
CG: OH MY GOD
CG: CAN WE MOVE ON FROM THIS PART OF THE CONVERSATION?
GA: Well If You Insist
GA: Should I Tell You Now About The Barrage Of Elderly Quiltmakers I Dealt With Today
You spend the rest of the night talking to Kanaya, only stopping when she points out the time zone difference and announces that she has to go to bed. You check the clock and realize that you should probably sleep, too.

Two hours of sleepless lying in bed later you accept that that’s not going to happen. You occupy yourself with your phone until the sun rises, switching between reading light novels on the overly bright screen and playing whatever free games are on the app store.

Oh well, you think as you drag yourself out of bed and decide to head to the shower. You’re pretty used to running on no sleep.

==> Be Dave.

You wake up too early again, this time flopping out of bed almost immediately out of a desperate need to take a piss. You walk barefoot to the hallway bathroom, realizing once you step out that putting on shoes might’ve been a good idea. There’s no one around, though, so you dart into the bathroom to quickly do your business.

When you open the door back out into the hall you’re immediately face-to-face with Karkat Vantas. Or rather, face to the space above his head, while he is treated to a grand view of your torso.

“Sup?” you croak out, voice still raw with sleep. You clear your throat and try again. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he mutters. He has a pile of what looks like clothes and a towel in his arms, held tightly over his chest.

“What brings you around these parts?” you ask him, earning an incredulous look in response.

“I’m taking a shower,” he says. “What the fuck else would I be doing?”

You simply shrug, still standing between him and the doorway.

“So do you maybe want to get out of my way?” he asks, brushing past you angrily. You’re pushed roughly into the door frame and have to take a minute to marvel at the apparent strength this kid has.

“See you later, I guess,” you mumble, making your way back to your room. “And good morning to you, too.”

When John wakes up you go down to the dining hall together. He’s talking a mile a minute about something that’s happening next week, or something, but it’s hard to really focus.

“If Rose and Jade are okay with the guest room, then they can sleep over, too. I wonder if Karkat wants to come, what do you think?”

“I’m sorry, what?” you ask sleepily, and he gives you a look. “I gotta be honest, dude, I haven’t really been listening to anything you’ve said. I’m tired as hell.”

John sighs in exasperation, pausing to take a bite of a blueberry muffin.

“Dude, I’m telling you. I finally have all my friends here, we are going to the fair together.”

“What, like the state fair?” you ask. “Like with carnival games and shit?”
“Yeah!” John says excitedly. “But way better. There’s tons of rides and awesome food, and carnival games, too, but those are kind of a waste of money…”

“Right, okay, but what’s this about sleeping over?”

“Well,” John says. “The fair’s down in Puyallup, so it’d be easier to stay at my house rather than drive back to Seattle at the end of the day. We can do it on the weekend when none of us have classes.”

“Uh, and is your dad okay with this?” you ask, finding yourself trying to imagine what John’s house might be like. What his dad might be like. You swallow hard.

“Yeah, of course!” John says with a smile. “He’d love to have a bunch of guests to bake for, I hope you like spongecake.”

You crack a smile, then take a drink of apple juice. John’s dad seems harmless enough, nice even.

You both eat your breakfasts for a few minutes more. Well, you’ve never been one for food first thing in the morning, so you sip at your juice.

“What about your bro, though? Do you think he’d care?”

You swallow a bit weirdly when John’s words reach your ears. “What? Fuck no, why would he care if I stay over at my best friend’s place?”

John shrugs. “I don’t know, some people’s parents- err, guardians- need to know about these kind of things. But if it’s fine, then don’t bother him, I guess.”

“Yeah, he wouldn’t care,” you say, a bit too quickly.

It’s when you’re leaving and heading to class that you realize that talking about Bro makes you uncomfortable. Thinking about him makes you uncomfortable. You stop just outside your class’ building to take a breather.

You miss him, you suppose. You’ve never been away from home, so you never knew what this would feel like. Homesickness. That’s what this is, you think.

Something still doesn’t sit right with you as you head inside, but being in class turns out to be an excellent distraction.

== Be Karkat.

You sit next to Rose in class again. She’s quiet and seems to be as interested in the subject as you are, which is to say, pretty interested. Writing has always been one of your favorite hobbies. You look over at Rose and wonder what she likes to write about, and figure that it’s probably of the Lovecraftian variety, minus the racism, of course.

Towards the end of class a few announcements are made about upcoming assignments and school clubs. You try not to tune it out, but by this time in the day your brain has gotten pretty tired.

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“I don’t know, maybe,” you mutter back. “What about you?”
“Probably not,” she says. “I’m already quite busy with the LGBT club.”

“Oh,” you say, and it comes out sort of like a question. She looks at you out of the corner of her eye.

“You can ask, if you want. I don’t mind.” She turns the page of her book absently. It opens to an anatomical illustration of a mollusk.

“Uh,” is all you really say, because you feel really fucking awkward.

Rose sighs. “I’m a lesbian, yes. That’s what you wanted to know, right?”

“Well, I mean…” you start to say, but the words trail off.

Rose traces the mollusk with a manicured finger. “Does that make you uncomfortable?”

“What? No,” you say quickly. “Fuck no, one of my best friends is a trans lesbian.”

“Mmm,” she hums in response.

“And I’m not exactly…” you start, heat rising to your face. “You know, um, straight… or, uh, cis, either.” You resist the urge to clear your throat.

She raises a brow. “Oh? Have you thought about joining, then?”

It takes you a moment to realize that she means the LGBT club. You shake your head, laughing a bit awkwardly.

“Uh, no, not really. I’m not, uh, out or anything like that.”

She nods and gives you an understanding look before returning to her book. The next page is full of small text.

“So…” you say, and it really feels like your heart is in your throat or something, because goddamn, does talking about this stuff aloud make you want to shrivel up and die. “Don’t tell anyone. You and John are the only people who know I’m trans, and I want to keep it that way, okay?”

“Of course,” she says, and something in her voice puts your mind at ease. Rose strikes you as a person who keeps her word.

You swallow hard, mouth feeling a tad less dry than before. You’re not sure why you’ve suddenly entrusted this girl you’ve only known a week with your biggest secret and insecurity, but you are sure that you’re going to spend the rest of the foreseeable future beating yourself up for it.

“So, about your best friend,” Rose says suddenly, snapping her book shut. “What’s she like?”

The subject change catches you off guard, and you can’t help a small laugh as you search for the words to describe Kanaya Maryam to this girl.

You don’t think you’re good at a lot of things, but this, kindling the beginning of a viable relationship between two people, this you feel like you can do. Before class ends you give Rose Kanaya’s chumhandle.

==> Be Dave.

You always get back to the dorm a bit before John, giving you about a half hour of solitary introspection to work with, or rather, to work with you.
You open up your laptop, determined to not let your brain be the one in charge this afternoon. You need a distraction, you need to space out and do nothing, you need-

You take a deep breath and wonder when you got so damn anxious.

Pesterchum seems like a decent enough distraction, you decide.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 15:59 --

TG: hey
CG: HI?
CG: WHAT DO YOU WANT.
TG: dude im just saying hi
TG: and asking whats up
TG: im bored as shit maybe i just wanna talk to a bro alright
CG: SINCE WHEN AM I A BRO?
CG: NEVERMIND, I DON’T ACTUALLY CARE.
CG: BUT IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN KNOWING ‘WHAT IS UP’ I’LL TELL YOU, I GUESS.
TG: fuck yes tell me all about your day honey
TG: how was the pta meeting
TG: did brenda bring in those shitty brownies again
TG: man i hate brenda
CG: WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT.
CG: LIKE SERIOUSLY, WHAT IS THIS CONVERSATION AND WHERE IS IT GOING?
TG: fuck i dont know dude
TG: i just wanna talk about dumb shit okay im kind of
TG: fuck
CG: ?
CG: UH, ARE YOU OKAY?
TG: yeah im fantastic
TG: anyways what happened today give me the details
CG: WELL.
CG: FIRST OF ALL, I WENT TO TAKE A SHOWER THIS MORNING AND HAD TO PUSH BACK SOME ASSHOLE STANDING IN THE DOORWAY.
TG: haha
TG: i forgot that happened
TG: to be fair i was kinda just standing there because at first i thought you were a girl or something
CG: ...
CG: FUCK.
CG: YOU.
TG: it was just like a split second tho
TG: probably mostly because youre like a foot shorter than me
CG: NO. FUCK YOU. AND FUCK YOU.
CG: FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU.
CG: YOU GODDAMN SHIT SNIFFING PIECE OF ACTUAL INCONSIDERATE GARBAGE.
TG: whoa hey there
TG: alright obviously i hit a nerve or something sorry
TG: dude im just trying to chat up my best friends best friend and i guess im just running my mouth like i would with someone i already know
TG: like talking shit and teasing is par for the course with me and john and with you and him too right
TG: i guess we havent yet bridged the gap to chummy shittalking friend guy town
CG: ...
TG: shit im sorry man
CG: IF YOU EVER CALL ME A GIRL AGAIN I WILL NOT HESITATE TO PUNCH YOU IN YOUR FUCKING SORRY EXCUSE FOR A FACE, MARK MY WORDS.
TG: got it
TG: words have been marked as hell
TG: just thoroughly and perfectly marked
TG: the most marked words have ever been
CG: OH MY GOD, DO YOU EVER SHUT UP?
TG: lol no not really
CG: UGH.
CG: I GUESS I'M NOT ONE TO COMPLAIN. IF I ACTUALLY LIKED YOU I PROBABLY WOULD BE RUNNING MY MOUTH JUST AS MUCH.
TG: damn
TG: and here i was thinking you were starting to warm up to me
TG: anyways have you heard john talking about this thing next weekend
CG: NEXT WEEKEND?
TG: yeah he wants us all to go to the fair i guess then stay over at his place
TG: i guess thats a big deal here or something
TG: i heard a bunch of my teachers talkin and fuckin salivating at the mouth over some goddamn fair scones
CG: A FAIR? WHAT LIKE A FUCKING RENAISSANCE FAIRE OR SOME SHIT.
TG: no lol like a state fair
TG: its got like rides and games and food
CG: SO A CARNIVAL. WOW, SOUNDS LIKE SO MUCH FUN.
TG: dude john wont shut up about this so like
TG: just come with us pls im sure it will actually be ‘so much fun’
TG: if you come then there will be five of us which means i can be the fifth wheel
CG: YOU *WANT* TO BE THE FIFTH WHEEL?
TG: shit yeah
TG: its either that or getting wrapped up in pseudo-coupley bullshit with jade and
TG: nah i really dont want that
CG: WHY, WHAT'S WRONG WITH JADE?
TG: nothing man
TG: its just not like that yknow
CG: HUH.
CG: IT SEEMED PRETTY ‘LIKE THAT’ TO ME.
TG: idk maybe for jade it is
TG: and maybe it used to be for me
TG: but i really just dont feel like that towards her
TG: i wish i did but i dont
TG: i wish i could be her boyfriend like i think she wants but i just cant
TG: so its just all really fucking awkward lol
CG: SHIT, UH?
CG: I'M SORRY?
TG: dont be
TG: just come with us so i can fifth wheel myself and we can all have an awesome time
CG: FINE. I'LL GO.
TG: nice
TG: john just got back ill tell him you said yes
CG: AM I GOING TO REGRET THIS?
CG: WAIT DON’T TELL ME, I ALREADY KNOW I WILL.
TG: lol
TG: anyways im gonna go talk to you later dude
CG: PLEASE DON’T.
TG: haha peace


“Karkat’s coming,” you say to John, the first words out of your mouth since he walked in the door a minute or so ago.

“Huh?” he says. “Oh, to the fair next weekend? Awesome!” John plops down on his bed, big goofy smile on his face as he opens his laptop.

You sit in silence for a few moments, each doing your own thing. You think back to what Rose said about things being cozy, and you realize that this is starting to come close.

You let out a long sigh and look over at John, smiling to yourself as your best friend sticks his tongue out in concentration as he does… whatever it is he’s doing.

Your eyes flutter closed, and you feel okay. More than okay. Pretty damn peaceful, even.

===> Be Karkat.

You take a minute to process your most recent Pesterchum conversation. And by ‘process’ I mean ‘groan loudly into your pillow out of frustration,’ of course.

You could have gone off more, really just torn Dave apart over what he said. But that was a one-way ticket to outing yourself, so you force yourself to be satisfied with what you did say to him.

At least he said sorry. That was more than you could ask for from some people, even from people who knew why it was such a sensitive topic for you. Doesn’t mean you’ve forgiven him just yet, but you did agree to pretty much spend the entirety of next weekend with him and his friends.

You finally roll over so you’re no longer face-down on your pillow, letting out a long sigh as you do. You hear a notification from Pesterchum.

-- gardenGnostic [GG] has requested to be your chum! --

GG: hey karkat!
GG: its jade :D

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] and gardenGnostic [GG] are now chums! --

CG: UH, HI JADE.
CG: DO YOU WANT SOMETHING, OR...
GG: no i just wanted to say hi!
GG: and rose said i should add you on here
GG: shes talking to someone right now and is pretty into it :o
CG: WHY DO I HAVE THE FEELING I KNOW EXACTLY WHO THAT SOMEONE IS.
GG: would that someone maybe be a lovely lady youve introduced to her? :)
CG: WELL I DONT KNOW ABOUT LOVELY.
CG: UGH, WHO AM I KIDDING. KANAYA *IS* LOVELY, I JUST CAN’T RIP ON HER THE WAY I DO WITH EVERYONE ELSE.
GG: what about me?
GG: ive only known you a little bit and so far you seem ok!
GG: i mean youre a little on the grumpy side but i guess no ones perfect
CG: DON’T PRESS YOUR LUCK, JADE.
CG: I AM A GRADE-A ASSHOLE AND YOU WILL FEEL MY WRATH SOON ENOUGH.
GG: hehe
GG: you know what i think? i think thats all an act >:
CG: YOU ARE HIS FRIEND, TOO.
CG: YOU REALIZE THAT YOU’RE SAYING YOU’RE A DORK AS WELL, RIGHT?
GG: well i wont deny it!
GG: being kind of a loser nerd dork is fun though
GG: even if some people are kinda mean about stuff like that
GG: but thats why we all gotta stick together!
CG: YOU SEEM LIKE A GENERALLY CHEERFUL AND WELL-ADJUSTED PERSON.
CG: WHY ARE YOU TALKING TO ME, OF ALL PEOPLE?
GG: karkat youre friends with my friends
GG: so that means we have to be friends!
GG: i dont care that youre a big grump
GG: i just know that john thinks youre awesome and dave thinks youre funny and rose thinks youre cool
CG: AND WHAT DO YOU THINK I AM?
GG: i dont know yet!
GG: we havent really gotten the chance to get to know each other i guess
GG: but so far i would say that youre grumpy, and also a dork
CG: YES, YOU’VE ALREADY ESTABLISHED THAT.
CG: AND DON’T WORRY ABOUT GETTING TO KNOW ME, I’M SURE WE’LL HAVE PLENTY OF QUALITY TIME NEXT WEEKEND.
GG: oh so youre coming with us!
GG: im so excited, ive never been to anything like what johns talking about
GG: i sort of grew up on an island?
CG: WAIT, WHAT?
GG: yeah!
GG: in the pacific, i lived there with my grandpa
GG: but he died a couple years ago, so i was mostly by myself
CG: UH WOW, HOLY SHIT?
CG: SORRY TO HEAR THAT.
GG: its ok!
GG: i had my dog bec too so it wasnt too lonely
GG: and now im here with all of you guys!
GG: anyway, im gonna go soon because i have a bunch of homework
GG: but it was nice talking to you!
CG: YEAH, SAME I GUESS.
GG: :P

-- gardenGnostic [GG] ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 17:43 --

You close Pesterchum, you also have homework to do and you figure now is as good a time as any to get started.

The rest of the night you keep remembering what Jade said about Dave, about his act, about how he actually was.

About how he was like you.

You shake your head hard, as if to shake those thoughts from your conscious, and try to focus instead on your selected reading and worksheets.
Chapter 3

==> Be Dave.

The next week goes by fairly quickly. You go to your classes, John goes to his, you meet up with Jade and Karkat in the morning, say hi to Rose as you pass her in the afternoon, head back to your dorm after grabbing a quick bite to eat.

Suddenly it’s Friday and the five of you are walking up the steps of King Street Station to take the Sounder train to Kent, so that John’s dad can pick you all up and you can spend the night at his house.

All of those words and specific locations don’t mean much of anything to you. You sit next to John on the train and watch Seattle go by as the sun sets.

Across from you is Karkat, and on the other side of the aisle sit Rose and Jade. The sun shines through the windows on your side, and you catch yourself looking at how the setting sun lights up Karkat’s dark hair with its orange glow, long shadows cast across his face as he looks out the window, briefly interrupted by passing buildings and trees.

You’re staring at him, you realize, so you tear your eyes away to instead fiddle with your phone. That only lasts a few minutes before you look up again, only this time he catches your eye.

“What?” he says, furrowing his brows.

You simply shrug, which isn’t good enough for him, you guess, because he rolls his eyes.

“Take a picture, asshole, it’ll last longer,” he grumbles, turning his attention back to the window. The train is starting to leave Seattle, now, and you’re beginning to understand why they call it the evergreen state.

You remember that in your bag is an actual camera, your old polaroid that hasn’t been getting as much use lately. You grin as you unzip your backpack and pull it out.

Through the viewfinder, Karkat looks relatively serene as the late sunlight dances across his face, chin resting on his hand and elbow perched on the windowsill. You watch as he blinks a few times, then click the shutter.

“Hey, what the fuck?” Karkat nearly yells as the flash goes off.

You keep your face as straight as possible as you say, “Just following directions, dude.”

John laughs next to you as the photo pops out. You take it gently and resist the urge to shake it- you know you’re not actually supposed to- instead turning it over to shield it from the light.

“Oh my god,” Karkat says with a scoff. “Of course- of course you would actually take a fucking picture.”

“Lemme see,” John asks, taking it from you and shaking it haphazardly.

“Shit, dude, don’t ruin it,” you say, but when John stops you see that the image of Karkat had already developed, pretty damn perfectly if you do say so yourself.
“Give me that,” Karkat says, practically tearing it away from John. You watch him scrutinize it before he throws it back at you.

You raise your eyebrows at him, and he doesn’t say anything.

“I’m keeping this, I guess?”

“Yeah, like I’d want a shitty picture of myself, what the fuck would I do with that?” he mutters.

“I don’t know, I thought you might rip it up or something.”

Karkat glares at you. “Why? Because it was bad?”

“Nah,” you say as you drop the photo into an envelope in your bag, for safekeeping. “That one came out really well, actually. You just seemed kinda mad is all.”

He sighs through his nose. “Don’t surprise me like that again,” he says after a few beats of silence.

Not a ‘don’t do that again’ or a ‘don’t take pictures of me,’ just a ‘don’t surprise me.’ You’ll take it.

You point the camera over at Rose and Jade, and they smile together as you take another picture.

You make a mental note to get more use out of this thing.

=> Be Karkat.

After all the horror stories John’s told you about Kent, you resist the urge to smack him when he says that’s where you’re going today.

“Dude, it’ll be fine,” John says as you board the train. “We’ll only be there until my dad picks us up.”

You sit across from him and Dave on the train.

“I’m sure we won’t even get mugged, or anything,” John adds, laughing at the horrified look you give him.

Kent turns out to be perfectly fine when you arrive. The sun had just gone under the horizon, and the five of you wait at the station as the glowing florescent lights flicker to life above, buzzing loudly as they do a better job drawing in bugs than actually illuminating the space.

A different kind of light flashes just behind you, accompanied by the unmistakable sound of a shutter clicking and a polaroid photo being dispensed.

Dave’s been taking pictures of pretty much everything on the ride down, which might have been endearing if most of them weren’t of you. You’re not certain, but at this point you’re pretty sure he’s doing it to see how long it takes before you get pissed off. You give him a look as he aims the camera, pointing it right in your direction once again.

“Don’t you have enough pictures of me glaring at you?” you ask.

“Nope,” Dave says plainly as the flash goes off.

A small white car pulls up to the parking lot, and John announces that it’s his dad. As the five of you make your way to pile in, Rose wonders aloud how you were all supposed to fit in there.

The answer, apparently, was a small extra seat between the driver and passenger side, designated by
John and others to be for the smallest of the group.

You are the smallest of the group.

The drive from the station to John’s house isn’t too long, but you still spend the whole time seated in between John and his dad, who you only just met, by the way, inwardly cursing whoever it was that decided that you had to be so goddamn short.

John’s house is a typical, modest suburban home. You sigh in relief as John moves out of the way and lets you out of the car.

John’s dad isn’t a very talkative man, but so far he seems nice enough. He tells you and the others that he’ll bring your bags in, so you all awkwardly follow John into the living room.

“So we’re finally here,” Rose says, taking off a pair of flats and placing them gently in the entryway. You kick off your own shoes and sort of pile them up with John and Dave’s.

“Wow,” Jade says, a huge smile on her face as she looks around.

“Sit down wherever you want,” John says as he walks in. “Does anyone want a pop? I’m going to the kitchen.”

Dave follows John, saying something about apple juice, and damn, what was it with him and that one specific kind of juice? You stand with Rose and Jade, taking in John’s living room the best you can.

There’s a shelf full of harlequin figurines, and a huge urn on the mantle of an impressive fireplace underneath a photo of an old woman. On the walls are other clown-related memorabilia. You and Rose pause to admire a particularly large painting.

“This is… something,” she says.

“I heard him talk about the clown stuff, but Jesus…” you reply in disbelief.

Jade comes to stand on the other side of you, tilting her head to the side. “I don’t know, it’s not so bad, is it?”

You and Rose remain silent, which somehow seems more accurate to your feelings on John’s house decor than any words could be, and Jade herself doesn’t sound so convinced.

John and Dave come back from the kitchen, carrying cans of Coke and Sprite and bags of potato chips. “You guys ready to eat a bunch of garbage?” Dave asks, handing you a cold can of soda.

The five of you spend the rest of the night sitting on the floor of the living room, junk food strewn about amongst a few plates of actual food John’s dad had served. John plugs in his Gamecube and you take turns playing Mario Kart, getting unreasonably and laughably angry at each other over blue shells and banana peels.

When it’s time for bed, you take your baggiest sweater and a pair of sweatpants to the bathroom. You peel off your binder, unable to stop the sigh that comes out when you do. Your ribs feel a bit sore, so there goes any ideas you had about wearing a sports bra to bed. The sweater does a good job of hiding the goods, but you still fold your arms over your chest as you return to John’s bedroom.

Fortunately for you, Dave is already passed out on the floor, lying face-down on a blue sleeping bag.
“Got you one, too,” John says, handing you a green roll of plasticy fabric.

You take it from him, and can’t help but feel like he’s staring.

“Just say whatever it is you wanna say,” you mutter as you unroll the bedding.

“I’m- I’m not saying anything?” John says. “I mean, unless you want me to?”

You sit on the floor, knees bent and arms wrapped around them. “Now’s your chance to get out whatever you want about my tits, while he’s asleep.” You cock your head towards Dave’s sleeping form.

John laughs, quietly and a bit awkward. “Dude, you know I’m not gonna say anything about… that.” He tosses you a pillow, and it lands by your feet. “I don’t care, um, it’s okay, you know?”

You sigh, taking the pillow and lying back on the floor. “Yeah, sorry, I guess I just-” you pause and swallow. John waits patiently. “I guess a part of me expects everyone else to be as hard on me as I am on myself.”

Your words come out quiet and unintentionally poignant. John nods on the other side of the room, where he sits on his bed. When you don’t say anything more, he reaches over and flicks off the light.

“G’night, Karkat,” John says quietly.

“Night,” you reply, no more than a whisper.

==> Be Dave.

You open your eyes, the world just barely coming into focus as you realize something is pushing you down. Holding you down. Something or someone is holding you down, and if you could only get your brain to make sense of this-

You look up into your brother’s face, your body completely frozen over in fear. You can’t move, why can’t you move? Your mouth is open and you are screaming but there’s no sound, and is your mouth even open? You can’t move.

Bro has one big hand clasped around your throat and the other pressing down on your chest. His face is blank and all you can do is meet his eyes through the dark glass of his shades as he chokes you. As he chokes you. He’s choking you. You can’t breathe.

“Dave?” a voice next to you says, gentle and soft. Someone is shaking your shoulder. “Dave?” the voice says again, more urgent.

You sit up, gasping and shaking. One look around tells you that your brother is not here, you’re in John’s room, of course, and the voice next to you…

Karkat looks at you with an air of concern you’ve never seen from him before. You realize that you’re panting and covered in sweat.

“Thanks,” you croak out. “For waking me.”

He makes a sort of sputtering sound. “Oh, sorry, it only seemed like you were having a nightmare or something, forgive me for interrupting your beauty sleep,” he says, voice low and raw. You think this is as close as he can get to whispering.

“I was being serious,” you say, sitting up further and putting on your shades. “You brought me out
of sleep paralysis, I am actually thanking you, asshole.”

Karkat opens his mouth as if to say more, but shuts it again. Another quick look around tells you that John must already be up, as he’s not in his bed. You wonder vaguely what time it must be, maybe around seven?

“What is sleep paralysis?” Karkat asks as you stand up. He’s looks up at you from where he sits on his sleeping bag, chin resting on top of knees folded up over his chest.

“It’s like… your brain wakes up before your body, or something. You can’t move, so your brain imagines all kinds of fucked up shit to justify that, like being held down or showing monsters all over the place.” You stretch your arms up over your head. “Pretty fucking up stuff.”

“Oh,” Karkat says. “Yeah, that sounds pretty fucking awful.”

You make your way to the door. “I’m going to find John downstairs, you coming?”

Karkat seems to curl in on himself even more. “No, I’m gonna get dressed first.”

“Dressed? Dude we’re just having breakfast or whatever, you don’t need to get dressed,” you say with a quirk of your brow.

“I’m gonna get dressed first,” Karkat repeats, firmly.

“Suit yourself,” you shrug as you leave. When the door closes you swear you hear Karkat lock it behind you.

John is, in fact, downstairs, along with Jade, along with what seems to be a very large quantity of french toast and bacon, judging by the smell.

“Hey, Dave!” John says cheerfully from the kitchen. Jade stands next to him, flipping over pieces of bread on a skillet. She gives you a smile.

“Sup?” you say, taking a seat at the breakfast table, a rectangular old thing covered in a checkered blue cloth. The chairs are made of wood and creak under your weight.

“John’s teaching me how to make french toast, wanna help?” Jade says, holding up a plastic spatula.

“Nah, I’m good, you two seem like you got it covered.” You watch as John lays strips of bacon onto another pan, the raw meat sizzling loudly. “Where’s Rose?”

“Sleeping, still,” Jade says. “I tried to wake her up, but she hit me with her pillow.”

“Not a morning person, I guess,” John says. “Oh well, I guess she can sleep while we’re still making breakfast. What about Karkat?”

“Huh?” you say, fiddling with the edge of the tablecloth. “Oh, he’s up, he wanted to get dressed first, I guess.”

Just as the words leave your mouth, Karkat walks into the kitchen. He is indeed dressed, wearing a pair of grey jeans and a black pullover. He sits next to you at the table.

“Hey, Karkat!” John says, just as cheerfully as when he greeted you. “Hope you like bacon, cause I’m making a ton of it.”

He grunts in response. “You got any coffee?”
John nods towards a coffee pot, filled about halfway with a dark liquid. “Yeah, my dad made some. Help yourself.”

You watch Karkat get up to pour black coffee into a white cup, sitting back down next to you. He sips at the contents of the mug, seemingly okay with drinking the bitter nightmare that was black coffee, but to each his own, you guess.

His black hair sticks up messily, falling over his eyes and into his face, too. His eyes meet yours, and shit, you’re staring again, aren’t you?

“Nice hair,” you say with a grin.

Karkat rakes a hand through the black locks, which doesn’t do much to tame his bedhead. “Yeah, thanks, I know.”

After getting your fill of Egbert and Harley-made food, and after dragging Rose out of bed and forcing a mug of hot coffee into her hands, you head back upstairs to get dressed yourself.

When you come back down, wearing a light long sleeved shirt pushed up around your wrists and a pair of jeans, Karkat is pulling his shoes on by the door.

“Shoot, are we heading out already?” you ask.

“We’re supposed to go soon, everyone’s taking their fucking time, though,” Karkat says, looking up at you through his bangs.

“What’s the hurry?” you shrug, picking up your own shoes and sitting down on the stairs.

Karkat shoves his foot down into his Converse, forcing the heel to fold back up over his ankle. “What’s the use in just standing around doing nothing?”

You decide you can’t argue with that and start to put your own shoes on, not bothering to untie the laces or anything. As you adjust the heel, you realize that you and Karkat have the same shoes, only yours are red and his are black.

And yours are a lot dirtier, probably older, too, you realize.

But whatever, you’re not the kind of guy to get all hung up about his shoes or anything like that. You sigh and stand up, joining Karkat by the door.

John comes down the stairs, bouncing a little with each step. “Alright, who’s ready to go?”

==>

Be Karkat.

You were, in fact, ‘ready to go’ for probably the last ten fucking minutes, but you don’t say anything and instead just follow John out to the car.

With it just being the five of you kids today, instead of being shoved in between two people in the front you end up slightly less uncomfortable, but still shoved in between two people, in the back. Dave calls shotgun and John gets in the driver’s seat, so you sit with Rose and Jade on either side of you, something about how the smallest person should sit in the middle, you don’t know. Bullshit, you said, but still ended up there, anyways.

The best use of your time during the ride to Puyallup is, you decide, alternating between yelling at John for his poor driving skills and yelling at Dave for constantly changing the radio station.
Dave had just flipped away from a generic pop station when you see it in the distance, a tall metal structure of some sort with flags waving up on top, sticking up sorely out of the landscape off the side of the highway. “What the fuck is that?” you ask.

John glances over, turning on the blinker and pulling into an exit. “That’s the Extreme Scream! It’s a ride that goes up and down, I guess. I’ve never been on it because it costs like fifteen bucks or something.”

“Oh, fuck that,” Dave murmurs next to him. “We’re spending all our money on food, right?”

“Spend your own money on whatever you want,” John says with a smirk. “But my dad gave me enough to get us all dizzy passes, so don’t think you’re getting off easy, mister.”

“Dizzy passes, right, okay. And that means?” Dave asks.

“It means,” John says, pointedly, “that we can ride whatever we want all day without having to worry about buying more tickets or running out, and you better believe we’re going to get our money’s worth!”

“Your dad’s money’s worth,” Rose adds.

“My dad’s money’s worth,” John repeats. The car pulls off the highway and into a line of cars, coming up on the beginnings of a small town.

“Define ‘money’s worth’,” Dave says plainly.

“It means we’re going to ride everything here twenty times in a row!” Jade says excitedly, then gives him a teasing look. “Unless you’re scared, Dave.”

The cars and pedestrians grow denser, and you see what you think are the fairgrounds in the distance. John slows down and rolls down his window, turning into a grassy lot filled with cars.

“I’m not scared,” Dave says. “Maybe I’m just too fucking cool for any of this.” He crosses his arms.

“Scaredy-cat,” Jade says in a quiet singsong voice as John hands a man in a booth money for parking. She elbows you in the side. “You’re not scared, are you, Karkat?”

“These are just little fucking carnival rides that spin around and shit,” you shrug. “So no, I’m not scared.”

“Sounds like something someone who’s scared would say,” Jade says, and before you can come up with a retort John shuts off the engine and everyone piles out of the car.

The mid-morning sun lights up the makeshift parking lot with a warm glow, in the distance the gates of the fairgrounds and a few of the taller rides can be seen. John and Jade lead the way, walking ahead and kicking up dust with their sneakers. You turn around and see Dave walking just behind you, rubbing his glasses with the hem of his shirt, and, oh.

You’ve seen him without his glasses before. Last night, before you went to sleep, and this morning, when the early light woke you up and you turned over and saw him.

His eyebrows had been drawn tightly together, jaw clenched and eyes squeezed shut. Without the shades you could see more of his freckles, the shape of his eyes more clearly. When you shook him awake, you saw that they were red.
Not bloodshot, well, maybe a bit, but the color of his irises was a deep shade of crimson you didn’t even think it was possible to have. Maybe it was the lighting, maybe they were just a weird shade of brown.

Behind you, Dave puts his shades back on. He wears a blank expression. It’s easy to forget that this morning you actually thought we was, well…

…beautiful, or something.

You glance back at him. He shoves his hands in his pockets, making no effort to catch up with the four of you. Fifth-wheeling himself, right. You scoff and turn around, walking alongside Rose.

Crowds of people congregate at a crosswalk, on the other side is what looks like a decent sized line and even more people just standing around. The gate to the grounds is a tall wooden structure with giant fake cow heads mounted onto the side.

While you wait in line you double, triple, check with John that this isn’t going to be a massive waste of time and money. Your time and his dad’s money, you make sure to clarify. John just laughs and promises that you’ll love it.

Once you all pay your way inside, you come through the gate and on the other side is a fountain and, indeed, more people. Way more people than you were expecting. You take a deep breath and in the moment you take to slow down, Dave bumps into you from behind.

“Shit, sorry,” he says, placing one of his hands on top of your head.

You open your mouth to say something, something probably too loud and too rude, but then his hand is gone, and you realize you’re blushing.

You realize it felt sort of nice to just… kind of be patted on the head like that. Your mouth goes a bit dry because, fuck, you’ve always been kind of a sucker for little touches, haven’t you?

John leads the way through the crowds, towards where the rides and whatever special passes you’re supposed to be getting are. You look over at Dave once again.

You decide, however, very firmly and insistently, that you are not a sucker for Dave Strider.

==> Be Dave.

The first picture you take today is out the window of the passenger side of John’s car. It’s a blurry snapshot of passing highway scenery, mostly green and gray, with what looks like the edge of a red car on the left hand side. Not your best work.

You point the camera at the distant ferris wheel once you get into the fair. You point it at the fountain near the entrance. You point it at Karkat.

He sticks up his middle finger just as you as you press the shutter.

John drags you this way; you all get paper wristbands. John drags you that way; the five of you share a massive cone of blue and pink cotton candy.

You hold the cone in your hand, everyone else tearing pieces off as they see fit. There’s so much noise, you notice that right away. You’ve been noticing since you walked in the place. People talking, people walking. A kid shrieks and starts crying, a woman yells a greeting at her friend. Pavement and stay gravel crunches under your feet.
And there’s music, too. Cheery carnival music mixed in with random pop songs playing from this booth or that stand, the muffled sounds of a country music concert in the distance. You close your eyes.

There’s screaming in the distance, metal contraptions creaking and groaning and the hissing of hydraulics. Nearby, a child strikes a hammer and rings a bell, the sound causing you to snap your head.

“Gimme,” Karkat says next to you, pulling at what’s left of the cotton candy. He pops a fluffy piece of blue sugar in his mouth, and it sticks to his fingers. “What?” he asks.

You shrug. “I don’t know, what?”

He furrows his brows. “You’re always fucking staring at me, you know that?”

You only shrug again, earning a scoff in response.

Inside, you feel yourself burning, because shit, you are always staring at him, aren’t you?

John leads the way to a spider-like ride, excitedly getting in line with Jade. You look over the spinning contraption, seeing two to a seat in every little spinning pod. Instead of getting in line, you stand beside it, leaning on a metal divider.

“Yo, I’m gonna sit this one out,” you tell them.


“I’m either going to sit alone or sit with some rando, so instead I’m just gonna stand here while y’all have your fun,” you say.

“Dude, come on,” John says. “I’ll sit with some rando if you want, you can sit with Jade!”

You swallow hard. “Nah, it’s fine.” You try not to see the obvious look of confusion (disappointment?) on her face. Fuck, you feel awful.

The ride stops and you watch the line move forward, watch as they all get on, John and Jade together, Karkat climbing into a seat next to Rose. She waves at you, and you wave back.

You toss the remnants of the cotton candy, taking your camera from where it hangs around your neck. The ride starts spinning fast, but you’ll be damned if you don’t try to get at least one blurry photo of your friends screaming and spinning on some kind of spider abomination.

After a couple more rides, one that only took four and yet another that took two, Rose comes up to you at the exit gate.

“I suspect the reason you’re sitting these out is that you’re either actually afraid of these small carnival rides or that you’re avoiding some kind of social expectation,” she says casually.

“The former,” you say. She doesn’t look convinced.

“I’ll be the one to sit things out next time, I’m getting motion sickness anyway,” she pats you on the arm. “Sit with Karkat, have fun. Try not to be so god-awfully awkward around Jade.”

“I’m not,” you mumble in response. You watch her walk past you, just as the others make it to the gate.
You’re pushed into line behind what looks like a ferris wheel-like ride, made up of black rods and green spinning pods. John and Jade go ahead of you and before you know it, you’re caged into a cramped car with Karkat.

The seat groans and rocks beneath you, and you sit up abruptly, like sitting back too far in a chair and feeling as if you’ll fall.

“I hate this,” Karkat says next to you. He sits rigidly, as if his own stillness could stop the ride from moving anymore.

“Thanks,” you say sarcastically, and you catch him glaring at you in the corner of your eye.

“I didn’t mean- well, do you think I want to be in this thing with you?” he says.

“If you were shoved in here alone, would you be any less goddamn anxious?” you ask. You realize your camera is still hanging from your neck and wrap your fingers firmly around the strap.

“I don’t like things that go upside-down,” he says stiffly. The ride jolts to life.

“Well, it’s too late now,” you say as the wheel starts to turn. You hear Karkat mutter ‘fuck’ under his breath several times.

Almost immediately after starting up, the ride spins you both backwards. You hear Karkat yell ‘fuck’ very loudly several times.

The feeling of falling, yet not actually falling, makes it hard to breath, but you find yourself laughing instead of being scared. Your own laughter is drowned out by the sound of the ride and the wind in your ears.

The spinning starts to slow and you both find yourselves perched at the top of the wheel, the seat rocking and settling with your backs to the ground. Next to you, Karkat makes a sound like a nervous laugh, or the beginnings of a screaming fit.

“I hate this,” he says, then says it again, gripping the seat on either side of him. “I hate this, holy shit.”

“Dude, chill,” you say, and when you notice how rigid he still is, you continue with, “it’s alright, man, the ride’s over.”

He takes a couple of shaky breaths. From up here you can see most of the fairgrounds. Remembering your camera, you carefully lift it from around your neck and aim it at the skyline.

You snap a photo of the low sun behind a distant wooden coaster, wondering just what time it is, and is the sun really already starting to set?

The ride jolts back to life and slowly turns a few degrees before stopping once again. “Can’t they get us off this fuckin’ thing any faster?” Karkat says through gritted teeth. “And stop taking fucking pictures.”

You point the camera at him, but stop before pressing the shutter when you see him glaring at you through the viewfinder.

“Fine,” you say, turning the camera around and holding it out at arm’s length. “Let’s take selfies.”

You snap a photo just as Karkat squeezes his eyes shut and starts screaming. You take another after
holding up a peace sign.

Later you sit in a wobbly plastic chair at a long table under a large barn-like roof, a makeshift cafeteria surrounded by a number of food vendors. You fish out the photos you’ve taken thus far as John leaves the four of you alone to buy food.

“Get any good shots today?” Jade asks from her spot across from you, pushing up her over-sized glasses and peering over the pile of polaroids on the table.

“I dunno, I haven’t really looked at any of them yet. I did take a selfie with Karkat on that last ride, so I’m thinking: yes.”

Jade laughs and grabs a few photos from the pile, flipping through them with careful fingers. Rose pulls one from underneath, revealing a blurry square of blue and just the corner of what might’ve been a food cart.

“Amazing.”

You give her a look over your glasses.

“This one’s nice.” Karkat says next to you. You’re about to spit out a rebuttal when you look over, seeing a photo of John and Jade posing next to a hideous statue of a pig.

“Yeah?” you say, taking it from him and looking it over yourself. Your two friends smile brightly in the center of the frame. Oh. He was being sincere.

“And this one sucks.” He shows you another picture, this time of the two of you. You’re holding up two fingers while Karkat bares his teeth in a scream. When you see it, you can’t help but burst out laughing.

==> Be Karkat.

The sun had just dipped below the horizon when all the lights come on. Flashing bulbs on rides and games in all colors, strings of yellow hung up above, the rhythmic display on the ferris wheel. The entire fairground seems to have transformed in a blink of an eye. You hear Dave’s camera go off.

Jade leads the way to a ring-tossing game and manages to actually win a stuffed octopus, John buys the five of you something called an ‘elephant ear’ which turns out to be a fried piece of dough covered in cinnamon and sugar, and Rose and Dave drag you onto the world’s shittiest haunted pirate ship ride, for what you suspect were ironic purposes.

The sky turns dark, a blanket of blue-black with wisps of rain clouds floating lazily across. You watch John fail to throw a ball at a pyramid of glass bottles and laugh loudly.

There’s a sudden throb of pain in your upper middle back and you wince, pulling your arms around yourself, as if that might help. You take a deep breath and the pain passes.

“Yo, you alright?” Dave asks. You jump, having not realized he was next to you.

“I’m fine,” you say firmly. You will repeat this to yourself several times for the rest of the night.

At the end of the night, when the five of you are all catching yawns from each other, and after John waits in line to buy a baker’s dozen of scones, you make your way out to the parking lot. Jade calls shotgun and you end up sitting in between Rose and Dave. In the back seat of John’s car you share warm pastries dipped in raspberry jam.
In the dark all you can see out the window are passing street lamps, blurry and gone in a flash. Your eyelids feel heavy and you blink several times, fighting the urge to fall asleep.

Apparently, you lose.

You don’t even realize that you were asleep until you’re sitting in John’s driveway with your head resting on Dave’s shoulder.

“Are you gonna wake up on your own or what?” he’s saying, and you sit up so fast your head hurts for a moment.

A lot of you hurts right now, actually, and not just for a moment, either. Your chest feels tight and heavy, your ribs sore, your back aching, the muscles underneath your shoulders screaming for relief.

“Fuck,” you say, or try to, because what really comes out is a coughing fit followed by your apparent inability to breath, in between hacking up the nasty mucus that’s accumulated in your lungs.

“Shit, you alright?” Dave says, placing a hand on your back as your chest heaves. “Yo, John, Karkat’s acting weird.”

John opens the door on the other side of you, and where is Rose? You start to wonder how long you were sitting there drooling on Dave while everyone else was heading inside, but it’s kind of hard to dwell on that thought while your breaths are coming in too fast and too shallow and your chest feels like it might collapse.

“Hey, you okay?” John moves to awkwardly pat you on the back, you think, but the three of you realize at once that Dave still has his hand resting on you gently. He retrieves it.

“I need to take my binder off,” you manage to wheeze out. You suddenly wonder if John even knows what a binder is, but he seems to understand on some level and helps you inside, guiding you to the bathroom on the first floor.

As soon as the door shuts behind you, you rip off your sweatshirt and undershirt in the same motion, before carefully peeling your binder off over your head. Not an easy task, but you get it off and throw it down on the floor.

In the mirror you see yourself, hair slightly mussed with sleep, eyes underlined with dark circles, chest bare. You try not to look for long before pulling your sweatshirt back on.

You hear a knock at the door and open it to see John. “You need anything? Um…” he asks, rubbing the back of his neck with a stray hand.

“Ice. Or a mastectomy, if you can manage that.”

“I’ll, uh, find you some ice,” John says, turning and leaving for the kitchen. You follow him out to the living room, where you can see Dave and Rose sitting on the couch with Jade lying across their legs, apparently asleep.

“Don’t tell Kanaya,” you blurt out to Rose, and she raises her eyebrows in surprise.

“Don’t tell her what?”

“Don’t tell her that I…” you huff, “I don’t want her worry about me just because I was being a fucking idiot.”
Rose sighs, making to carefully place her hands under Jade’s knees and back as she stands, effortlessly lifting up the long-haired (and taller) girl in the process. “I won’t tell her, mostly because my conversations with her don’t usually involve intricate discussions about your health and whether or not you’re practicing binder safety.” She carries Jade over to the stairs and begins to ascend. “And for what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re an idiot, and she wouldn’t either.”

You watch her go up the stairs, leaving you alone with Dave for an awkward minute before John comes back.

“I didn’t find an ice pack, but I found this,” John says, handing you a frozen bag of peas.

You glare at it before accepting, gingerly placing it against your left pectoral. It’ll have to do for now.

“Lemme check the freezer in the garage,” John says quickly before darting out of the room.

You sit down on the floor next to the couch, switching the peas to the other side of your chest. Dave remains silent from where he sits just behind you, but you get the feeling he wants to say something.

“Spit it out,” you say, patience with social niceties having gone out the window long ago.

“Oh, so,” he starts, “what’s wrong with you, exactly? Did you pull a muscle when you up and passed out on me in the car?”

You turn to look at him and have to fight to keep your eyes from rolling to the back of your skull at that statement. You take a deep breath.

“No, I fucking-” you start, ready to complain, but the words sort of stick in your mouth, which suddenly feels so dry.

Fuck it.

“I wore my binder too long today and then fell asleep in it, which you’re not supposed to do, like at all.” You’re very aware of how fast those words came out, and your heart pounds in your ears as you wait for Dave’s response, a few seconds at most, but an eternity in your mind.

“Wait, what’s a binder?”

You are going to actually spontaneously combust.

“It’s a thing I have to wear to flatten out my chest, because for some hilarious reason, when my life was being planned out by whatever bullshit deity may exist, it was decided that when I went through puberty I was supposed to grow tits and bleed out my genitals once a month.”

Your face is unbearably hot, and you hold your breath and stare intently at the floor as you try to come to terms with whatever that was, because wow, you really have this ‘coming out’ thing down, don’t you?

“So you…” Dave starts to say. “You’re-

“I’m trans, yes,” you say bluntly, turning around to face him. “Honestly kind of surprised you didn’t pick up on that earlier.”

Dave runs his hand over his jaw. “Right, when I made fun of you for being short. And when I said you looked like a girl.” He sighs. “Fuck.”

“Yeah…” you say, because you’re not sure what else would do.
“Jesus, no wonder you think I’m such an asshole,” Dave says. “God I’m such a fucking dick, I’m so sorry.”

“Stop,” you say, cutting him off before he can ramble anymore. “Stop with the self-flagellation shit. I can tell you’re sorry, and that you feel pretty fucking bad.”

He clamps his mouth shut. You’re not certain, but you’re pretty sure he’s staring at you.

“And that’s enough,” you add quietly. “For me, for now. Just-”

You get caught on your words and have to take a minute to figure out what you want to say.

“Just don’t treat me any differently, please.”

“So… you want me to keep being an asshole?” he asks cautiously, sounding genuinely confused.

“No!” you snap. “I don’t want you to act any differently, just, stop saying stupid shit maybe?”

He laughs softly at that. “I don’t think I can guarantee anything, saying stupid shit and running my mouth is kind of my brand.”

You roll your eyes. “Listen, I know that my masculinity might be… more ‘fragile’ than most guys. But that doesn’t mean I want to be treated like a set of fine fucking china.”

Dave nods slowly. “Well, I’ll still be sure not to turn you upside down.” He pokes you in the forehead. “This way up, right?”

You can’t help but laugh, snorting even. Dave’s astronomical levels of dorkiness never ceases to surprise you. Jade was absolutely right about him.

And maybe you were wrong about him, in some ways (only some), because Dave gives you a small smile and you feel a warm rush of relief wash over your whole body. You see your reflection in his shades and you see yourself as you are, but now you know that he sees you that way, too. As yourself, your real self, and not as some guy trying too hard to keep a secret that could get him killed if it came out to the wrong person.

Pretending to be cis brought with it an incredible amount of mental exhaustion. Only after a brief stint of hormones in your senior year of high school and a lot of money spent on binders can you feel comfortable doing that without publicly misgendering yourself. And apparently, only after a couple weeks of knowing Dave you feel comfortable enough to not feel the need to do either.

You look away, not wanting to stare at him or your reflection any longer. You’re sure that later you’ll berate yourself for being so honest and trusting, but you ignore that thought, because in this moment, you feel safe with him.

And it feels nice.

“Guess who found a real ice pack!” John says as he reenters the room. You gladly relinquish the rapidly thawing bag of peas and finally, properly, ice your sore muscles.
Chapter 4

Be Dave.

The rest of September goes by in the blink of an eye. On the morning of October 4th you step outside and see the first signs of coloration on a tall maple tree, the tips of the highest leaves bleeding into a vibrant shade of crimson. You resist the urge to pick up one of the brightly colored leaves on the ground. You’ve never seen the trees change color before in the Texan city you grew up in.

In the mornings the whole world is cold and covered in dew, little droplets of water dotting spiderwebs on the bushes lining your walk to class. You wear your red hoodie and shiver under the soft cotton. You remember looking over at John that morning, pulling a navy blue windbreaker on over a striped sweater.

The wind picks up behind you and you wonder how you ended up here with only a few old sweatshirts and hoodies. You wonder where you’d even find a proper jacket. How you’d pay for it. Why you don’t have one already.

You make a mental note to ask John if you can borrow one of his as you step inside your class’ building. People walk in and out and bump into each other, but it’s not as hectic as high school passing periods were. You remember a part of your high school where the congestion was high and where there always seemed to be someone inexplicably playing the ukulele, thanking whatever gods there may be that you graduated and managed to escape that hellhole.

By the end of the day you have three more essays assigned, on top of two you’ve been procrastinating, in addition to a number of pages of assigned reading you have no intention of doing.

You made it through high school, you can certainly do another round of the ‘waiting until the last minute to half-ass everything but somehow get a good grade’ game. Back in your dorm, though, in those spare moments you have alone, you struggle to get yourself to start even though you’re pretty much in the final stretch right now.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] at 15:12 --

TG: yo
TG: whats up rose
TT: Nothing much, just all this studying I have to do.
TT: Meaning, maybe don’t talk to me right now? I’m pretty “swamped” as they say.
TG: wow rude
TG: how dare you put your education first over having a shitty convo with your brother
TT: This really does put a strain on our familial relations, doesn’t it?
TT: Maybe we’ll make the impulsive decision to disappear from each other’s lives, only to reunite years later by chance at a funeral, on an annoyingly appropriate rainy day.
TG: wait what
TG: are you referencing something
TT: No, I’m just continuing this dramatic storyline, for the irony’s sake.
TT: Cliche drama tropes, that is what the refrance.
TG: you know i specifically pestered you bc i wanted to waste time
TG: and here you are wasting my time
TG: and im like sitting here wondering why i thought this was a good idea
TT: Whatever reason you have for wanting to waste time is probably not a good one, I’m assuming.
TT: Knowing you, you’re probably putting off something important.
TG: hey you know what
TG: shut up
TG: shut up is what
TT: Well stated.
TG: im waiting around for john to get back but idk where he is
TT: John is here, Dave.
TG: here?
TT: The library, you know, where students study and do their work?
TG: wait people actually do that i thought that was a myth
TG: whatever then ill just up and get started on my stuff then
TG: no more wasting time or anything like that cause shits honestly pointless you know
TG: not gonna stall anymore at all im totally gonna do all this shitty school stuff i dont want to do at all
TT: Dave.
TT: I’m logging off because I actually AM going to do all my shitty school stuff.
TT: I suggest you do the same.
TG: yeah ok whatever

-- tentacleTherapist ceased pestering turntechGodhead at 15:29 --

You look over at the pile of books on your desk, a tiny, cheap thing matching John’s that came furnished with the room. Tomorrow you for sure have to turn in those two essays, and the day after that is another one, but you also have to have the reading done by then, too. You spend an hour listening to music and checking your blog before you even consider opening up Word.

Karkat.

His name pops into your head absolutely of its own accord, and you can see him in your mind’s eye, wearing an unzipped light parka one size too big as you stood outside in the rain today after class. You made a joke about the weather, and he laughed and told you it was stupid.

Things were a lot less awkward now than they were right after that trip to the fair. The morning after, when you were all headed back to campus, you couldn’t stop mentally berating yourself for making that dorky as shit comment about not turning Karkat upside because honestly, what was that? He laughed, but it was probably mostly at you instead of with you. And then in the next week you couldn’t get a full conversation in with him without sputtering like a dipshit, tripping over your words as you went about ‘not turning him upside down.’

And then there was the constant checking in with him. Asking him if he was hurting if he ever made a face that might’ve been interpreted that way, double checking that any of your questions or comments weren’t insensitive as fuck (they never were, and you know that if they were he wouldn’t hesitate to let you know and/or attempt to connect his fist to your face). You looked up the kind of things that a binder could do to someone, and if you thought you were scared that night when you didn’t know what was going on, you were wrong, because that was a cakewalk compared to knowing that your friend could potentially break a rib and fucking die.

You might be overreacting to some of this.

It was easier now that some time had passed, because truth be told, there’s not a single part of you that has the capacity to think of him any differently. You only hope that he knows that.

You wonder, vaguely, at what point you became so concerned with him and what he thinks of you. You decide not to try to pinpoint it.
You have one paragraph done of an English paper that’s supposed to be three pages long. It’s the intro, and it’s honestly kind of shit.

You read over your own words ten times more, delete a few, replace them with better words, then go back to your outline. You delete everything you wrote about the second body paragraph and start over. Then undo that, then undo undoing that.

This is going to be a long night.

One of the worst things about high school was being able to go online and look at your grades, being able to see how the exact percentage changed with each assignment, wondering if an extra hour of studying would have brought up a class by half a letter grade.

The fine line between an A and an A- was the bane of your existence.

You look over the document on your laptop screen once again. This is your first real essay of your first semester, and you’ll be damned if it doesn’t make a good impression. You’ll also be damned if you don’t finish it, and judging by how the clock already says 11pm, that is indeed a possibility.

Something clicks in whatever part of your head where motivation lies (panic? probably panic) and you finally just start typing whatever words you can get onto the page. Apathy sets in again around 2 in the morning, and you only have about half your word count.

Your laptop is burning a hole onto your stomach, so you take off your headphones (which honestly had been playing nothing for a while now, when your playlist ended you didn’t feel like putting in the effort to put on something else) and set it aside. Maybe laying on your bed while writing wasn’t the best idea, for either your neck or the quality of your work, but you’re nothing if not self-destructive.

A heavy sigh comes out through your nose. You close your eyes.

The last month, you’ve been going through the motions of college life. A shitty breakfast in the morning, class with Jade and Dave, classes with strangers, a shitty lunch, sometimes shared with John, and class with Rose. Go back to your dorm, half-ass your homework, fuck around online, then go to sleep.

You complain about it all, but the truth is, it’s a nice sort of routine. Having things to do was always better for you, and god knows that all that free time last summer before you came to Seattle was pretty much a disaster mental-health wise.

You’re sleeping less now than you were back then. It’s always too much or too little, but at least with too little you’re somewhat productive. For weeks you did nothing but sleep all day and play video games all night, only getting in one meal or so, whenever your dad felt like checking in on you.

Self-destructive, like I said.

You consider taking a quick nap, but instead you waste your time on the internet, taking breaks to stare blankly at your essay every once in awhile. The clock says it’s almost 3:30 now, and panic sets in again.

So you open Pesterchum.

CG: HEY
CG: ARE YOU STILL UP?
CG: ... 
CG: DAVE?
TG: fuck 
TG: yes hi
CG: SORRY
CG: I JUST
TG: whats up
CG: HOW LONG IS TOO LONG FOR A PERSON TO BE AWAKE?
CG: ASKING FOR A FRIEND.
TG: jesus karkat
TG: youre seriously asking ME
TG: do you know what im doing right now
CG: HOW THE FUCK SHOULD I KNOW?
TG: i am
TG: listening to
TG: finnish music
TG: from the 1970s
CG: DAVE WHAT THE FUCK.
TG: im not ok
TG: i dont know what this song is
TG: but theres a dude on the trumpet whos been farting into my ear for the better half of four minutes
TG: i have an essay
CG: YEAH, ME TOO ASSHOLE.
TG: what the finnish music thing
TG: or the trumpeter farting into your ear thing
CG: HA HA.
TG: who the f invented that instrument
TG: or any of the horns really
TG: and why the f are they called horns
TG: actually probably because people would literally blow into horns back in the like
TG: ice age or some shit right
TG: whose idea was it to do THAT
TG: "oh hey i just ripped this fuckin bone off this animals head"
TG: "i wonder what happens if i breathe into it really hard"
TG: like
TG: that happened and then people kept expanding on that basic concept
TG: of fart music
TG: wait horns arent even bones shit
TG: ...
TG: im very tired
CG: YEAH NO SHIT.
TG: 70s finland ran out of music give me another country
CG: I DON’T FUCKING KNOW?
CG: EGYPT?
TG: yeah holy shit
TG: this is cheery as fuck dude thank you
CG: DO I WANT TO WASTE MY TIME ASKING FOR AN EXPLANATION?
TG: theres a website that plays that was on the radio in whatever country/time
TG: and being a youth with academic responsibilities
TG: nothing is more important to me right now than listening to yugoslavian pop music
TG: [link]
TG: join me in this hell
CG: YEAH, I THINK I’LL PASS.
TG: dude no its great
CG: YOUR DEFINITION OF WHAT PASSES FOR ""GREAT"" IS A FUCKING JOKE AND YOU KNOW IT.
CG: I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHY I PESTERED YOU.
TG: because youre in the same boat as me right
TG: have important shit to do but youre wasting time with your good pal and listening to some choice vintage radio
CG: I AM NOT LISTENING TO "CHOICE VINTAGE RADIO"
CG: I AM LISTENING TO A JAPANESE WOMAN MOANING AWKWARDLY INTO MY HEADPHONES.
TG: ahahahahahaah holy shit dude
TG: i think i know what song came up
CG: YEAH, THANKS.
CG: THANK YOU SO MUCH DAVE, I’M SO GLAD I’M FRIENDS WITH YOU AND THAT I’M HAVING THIS EXPERIENCE.
CG: I DON’T WANT TO SHOVE GLASS INTO MY EARS AT ALL.
TG: lol dude try russia theres some really good ones
TG: i think im listening to a woman telling me to do squats but its kind of hard to tell
TG: dude
TG: hey
TG: sorry did i cross a line with the russian music
TG: is ‘try russia’ some kind of secret code word or something
TG: does it mean something really offensive in karkat-land or wherever the fuck you came from
TG: new jersey
TG: are you from new jersey
TG: hello?
CG: HOLY SHIT, WHAT?
TG: oh hi
CG: SORRY I DIDN’T REPLY FOR ALL OF FIVE MINUTES, UNLIKE SOME PEOPLE I ACTUALLY *AM* DOING WORK RIGHT NOW.
TG: lol no youre not
TG: i bet you just typed like three words while you were gone
CG: SHUT THE FUCK UP.
CG: AND NO, I’M NOT FROM FUCKING NEW JERSEY.
TG: where then
CG: ...
CG: MARYLAND
TG: why the pause dude
TG: is it like a secret or oh my god im sorry but how long is this drum solo going to go for is russia ok
TG: god i wish i knew what this guy was saying this beat is funky as hell
CG: SORRY, I DON’T USUALLY GO AROUND TELLING PEOPLE MY LIFE FUCKING STORY.
CG: AND, GIVEN HOW MUCH OF A RANCID ASSHOLE YOU CAN BE, THERE’S A NINETY NINE PERCENT CHANCE THAT YOU’RE GOING TO USE THIS INFORMATION AGAINST ME!
TG: when was the last time i was an asshole to you besides like a second ago
TG: and also this morning when i accidently implied you looked like a wet shih tzu when it was raining
TG: and at lunch when i stole your fries
TG: you know what dont answer that
TG: and lol how could i use this against you
CG: I DON’T KNOW, YOU TELL ME!
TG: at MOST i would just joke about
TG: crabs
TG: do you have crabs
TG: this is a suspiciously long pause
CG: NO I DON’T HAVE FUCKING CRABS.
TG: so what is maryland like
CG: IT’S FULL OF CRABS.
CG: LITERALLY EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING IN THE ENTIRE FUCKING STATE IS A CRAB.
CG: MY HOUSE WAS A CRAB. THE ROADS WERE MADE OF CRABS. YOU COULDN’T TAKE ONE FUCKING STEP WITHOUT SMASHING YOUR FOOT INTO THE SORRY CRANIUM OF SOME BLUE SCUTTLING ASSHOLE ON THE GROUND.
TG: lol
TG: wait i thought crabs were red
TG: or is that only when theyre dead
TG: dude how fucked up is it that we cook shit like that alive
CG: I’M PRETTY SURE THAT’S JUST LOBSTERS.
TG: well anyways
TG: like what part are you from give me the deets
CG: THE DEETS.
TG: yea
CG: I DON’T KNOW WHY YOU’RE SO INTERESTED. THERE’S NOT MUCH TO TELL.
CG: I LIVED IN A SUBURB OUTSIDE OF DC. IT WAS LIKE SATAN’S ASSHOLE IN THE SUMMER. I’VE NEVER LIVED ANYWHERE ELSE UNTIL NOW. END OF STORY.
TG: oh shoot outside of DC that sounds cool
TG: did you go there a lot
TG: hang out with the chiseled visage of lincoln
TG: did you kick it with barack
CG: OH MY GOD, NO.
CG: I MEAN, SOMETIMES I’D GO DOWN TO THE MUSEUMS BECAUSE THEY WERE FREE AND I HAD NOTHING BETTER TO DO.
TG: oh shit did they have dinosaurs
CG: ...
TG: like dino bones
TG: thatd be cool as shit please tell me they did
CG: YEAH?
CG: WELL, THEY DID BUT THEY ALL GOT TAKEN DOWN RIGHT BEFORE I LEFT BECAUSE THEY HAD TO CLEAN THEM. OR WHATEVER CRUSTY OLD MUSEUM CURATORS DO WITH DEAD ANIMAL BONES IN THEIR FREE TIME.
TG: dude i would love to be a crusty old curator hanging out with dead shit that sounds rad as hell
TG: not the crusty old part but like
TG: how fucking awesome would it be to just chill with the remains of motherfucking dinosaurs all hours of the day
CG: IT SOUNDS REALLY BORING, NO OFFENSE.
TG: full offense
TG: dinosaurs are fucking cool
CG: I TAKE IT THAT’S YOUR MAJOR, THEN.
CG: DINOSAURS.
TG: fuck yeah
TG: well not necessarily its more of like a cross disciplinary thing with archeology and paleontology
TG: also im taking anthropology which is cool as hell tbqh
TG: i just want to dig up dead shit is that so bad
CG: IT SOUNDS REALLY FUCKING CREEPY AND WEIRD, BUT I GUESS I’M NOT ONE TO JUDGE PEOPLE ON THEIR MAJORS.
TG: aahahaha literature right
TG: *some old asshole voice* what are you gonna do with that degree fucko
CG: *NEWSFLASH*, THAT STILL SOUNDED EXACTLY LIKE YOU, DAVE!
TG: wow ok
TG: i am ONE year older than you fuck off
CG: NO, YOU FUCK OFF. YOU’RE A FUCKING GRANDPA.
TG: well youre a fuckin douche
CG: YOU’RE OLD AS SHIT.
TG: i cant even drink yet shut up
CG: YOU’RE A WRINKLY PAIR OF GRANDPA TITS, FLOPPING IN THE WIND LIKE SOCKS FILLED WITH SHIT.
CG: OK, ADMITTEDLY THAT WAS A WEAK ONE.
CG: BUT MY POINT STILL STANDS.
TG: hahahaha what the fuck dude
TG: im laughing really hard what the shit
TG: can grandpa tits be my cool college nickname
CG: WHATEVER FLOATS YOUR FUCKING SEA VESSEL.
CG: OH GREAT.
CG: IT’S 4AM NOW.
CG: FUCKING WONDERFUL.
TG: dude stay up with me until 4:20
TG: please its important
CG: UGH.
CG: I’M STAYING UP ANYWAYS *AND YOU ARE TOO* BECAUSE WE HAVE CLASS IN FOUR HOURS.
CG: AND I’M GUESSING YOU’VE MADE AS MUCH PROGRESS AS I HAVE.
TG: yeah ok
TG: i guess we should
TG: do our things
CG: YEAH.
TG: wait give me another country before you go
CG: ...
CG: GERMANY.
CG: DO YOUR ESSAY. I’LL SEE YOU LATER.
TG: k bye

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 4:07 --

TG: 420 blaze it

-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 4:20 --

==> Be Dave.

“I wish it wasn’t weird for college students to go trick-or-treating.” John says one night, the two of you laying on your beds, doing nothing in particular.
“You just wanna do the tricks, man,” you say with a yawn. John laughs softly.

“The candy’s nice, too.” He lets out a sigh. “Maybe we could pretend to be little kids, get Karkat in on it.”

“Dude… man if you want some candy just go buy some,” you say. John turns to look at you, appalled.

“Pay for Halloween candy? What is wrong with you, Dave?”

You shrug, your head dropping to the side on your pillow. “How much would we even get, dude? Like a couple shitty lollipops?”

“My dad used to give me a pillowcase and take me to every house around the neighborhood. At the end of the night it’d be so heavy he had to carry it home for me,” John says fondly.

“Huh,” you say.

“Don’t tell me…” John starts, sitting up in bed. “You’ve never gone trick-or-treating?”

“I lived in a high rise apartment, how the fuck do you go around asking for candy in a place like that? Bro just bought that shit and put in the house without making me ask strangers for strange candy.”

John shakes his head. “A damn shame, Dave. You don’t know the joy of having people you’ve never seen before ritualistically drop free candy into your hands just ‘cause you said the secret Halloween password…” He yawns.

“I think we’re tired,” you say. John makes a noise in agreement.

You lie there silently for a moment.

“If you think I didn’t get tricks on Halloween, though, you’d be wrong.”

“Oh yeah? What’d your bro do?” John asks. “Make you fish Reese’s out of a puppet’s ass?”

You let out a hollow laugh, chest shaking against the bed. “Pretty much. I’d have to cut them open, though. Most of the time they were filled with, like, toothpicks or plastic bottle caps or shit like that.”

“Haha, what the fuck,” John says sleepily.

“Yeah, what the fuck,” you repeat. Your voice echoes his, but what John doesn’t see is the involuntary tremble of your jaw.

What the fuck.

“Gotta take a piss,” you say, hopping off the bed and walking out of the room faster than maybe you meant to.

You stand on the tile of the bathroom floor in a pair of old socks. There’s a hole in one of the toes. You feel cold.

And for no reason at all, you feel bad.

“Fuck, what’s wrong with me?” you whisper to yourself. In here no one can hear you except yourself, which is nice. You like being able to hear yourself, as silly as that might sound.
“Every time John talks about these feel-good times with his dad I feel like shit, like I’m jealous or something.”

In the mirror you can see your lips moving, but it feels foreign. You take off your shades. It feels foreign.

“Why can’t I just sit there and talk with my friends without making it all about myself and how things are for me? Why do I always have to fucking bring up weird shit about Bro and make it seem like it was so horrible for me growing up?”

Your shoulders tense up and your eyes unfocus, leaving your reflection a blurry mess.

“Instead of being a normal fucking person I twist every fucking conversation into a pity party and make things seem worse than they were, and—”

You rest your head in your hands and close your eyes. Something wet is on your face. You deny that it’s tears.

“Fuck, what is wrong with me?”

That question still burns in your mind when you return to your room. When you find John asleep and get back in bed yourself. When you’re lying sleepless under the covers for the rest of the night, until at some point you fall unconscious.

==> Be Karkat.

On the 31st, nothing is really all that different. Holidays stopped feeling special a long time ago. You look over orange and black decorations hung up by other students and try to find it in your heart to feel festive.

When you get to your first class you see Jade wearing a pair of striped tights and a black skirt paired with an orange cardigan. Dave has a paper pumpkin haphazardly safety-pinned to the front of his shirt.

“Where’s your fucking holiday spirit?” he asks you when you sit down.

“Dave, you only just made that and put that on this morning when I told you what day it was,” Jade says. “And you’re doing it ironically, don’t pretend you’re not!”

“What? Come on Jade, I’m serious as shit about this.” Dave draws a piece of candy corn next to a shitty doodle of a vampire on a stray piece of notebook paper- a character you’ve begrudging come to know as ‘Hella Jeff,’ who’s apparently come down with a bad case of jpeg vampirism. She rolls her eyes.

You came out to Jade a couple weeks ago; you already told everyone else you were trans, so what was one more in your friend group? She responded by telling you that she actually identified as a nonbinary girl, which you weren’t really expecting, at all. After leaving Kanaya back in DC, you’ve really missed having someone around who wasn’t cis to hang out with, and even if you still aren’t very close to her, you’ve come to respect and like Jade quite a bit.

So when the professor talks about a group project, you don’t hesitate to agree to work with her and Dave. You need a minimum of three for the project, and none of you feel like working with a stranger, so you get started.

By ‘get started’ I mean you immediately designate yourself as the leader, earning an apathetic stare
from Dave and an annoyed pout from Jade.

After class, you get a message from John.

-- ectoBiologist began pestering carcinoGeneticist at 09:57 --

EB: hey karkat!
EB: you know what today is, right?
CG: YES, JOHN. I KNOW HOW TO LOOK AT A FUCKING CALENDAR, FOR YOUR INFORMATION.
CG: AND THE ABSOLUTE FUCKLOAD OF TACKY ORANGE SHIT AND SKELETONS EVERYWHERE ISN’T EXACTLY SUBTLE.
EB: so you know what that means we gotta do today, right?
CG: UGH.
EB: yes that’s right! we’re watching scary movies and you’re invited!
CG: THANKS JOHN, I CAN Already FEEL MY PRECIOUS LITTLE TIME ON THIS EARTH WASTING AWAY AT THE MERE MENTION OF SUCH A RESPLENDENT INVITATION!
CG: AND WHERE WILL THIS FRANKLY BORING IDEA FOR A HALLOWEEN PARTY BE LOCATED?
EB: at mine and dave’s dorm duh.
EB: hey i never said it’d be a party or a riot or anything!
EB: just a night of us bros with cool movies and tons of candy.
EB: unless you have an actual party or something to go to, but i doubt that.
CG: NO I DON’T, BUT YOU HAVEN’T CONSIDERED MY THIRD OPTION: STAYING IN MY ROOM AND DOING NOTHING.
EB: well we’d just come over there, then!
CG: AND I’D JUST KICK YOU OUT!
CG: IF THAT WERE THE OPTION I’M CONSIDERING. I’LL PROBABLY JUST COME OVER TO YOUR ROOM ANYWAY.
EB: oh, well that was easy?
CG: YEAH, WELL.
CG: YOU AND DAVE CAN BE PRETTY FUCKING ANNOYING.
CG: LIKE, YOU TWO HAVE SO FAR BEEN A PRETTY IMPENETRABLE SHITSTAIN ON MY COLLEGE EXPERIENCE.
CG: LIKE, JESUS CHRIST, HOW MANY OF THESE CLOROX PENS IS IT GOING TO TAKE TO GET YOU OUT??
CG: AT THIS POINT I’M PRETTY SURE THEY DON’T EVEN WORK AND HAVE JUST ACCEPTED THESE SOILED TROUSERS AS SYMBOLIC OF WHAT MY LIFE IS NOW.
CG: BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN I DON’T LIKE HANGING OUT WITH YOU FROM TIME TO TIME.
CG: OR THAT I DON’T ACTUALLY HAVE FUN, OR WHATEVER.
EB: awww.
EB: we love you too, karkat. :B
CG: GOD.
CG: I’M ROLLING MY EYES SO HARD AT MY PHONE RIGHT NOW, YOU CAN’T EVEN IMAGINE.
EB: hehe
EB: anyways i gotta go, see you later man!

-- ectoBiologist ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist at 10:19 --
Later comes around, and you get a knock on your door. You’re not sure when you expected John to come over, but when he does the sound startles the shit out of you.

Because maybe you were knee deep in editing a romance-heavy scene from your latest writing project, and maybe you had your headphones on tightly over your head, and maybe when you registered the knock at your door you were just about to get to the good part of a song that you will vehemently deny that is by the Backstreet Boys.

“You know, you could’ve just texted me instead of banging on my fucking door, but that’d be asking you to, for once, not be such a vexatious dipshit” you say, ripping open the door harder than necessary, because who does John think he is, interrupting your music?

It’s Dave.

“Oh, uh, hey,” you say, anger quickly turning into a burning embarrassment when you see his face.

“Hey,” he replies plainly, like you hadn’t just screamed into his face thinking he was someone else. “John wants to watch shitty movies, you coming over?”

“Yeah, sure,” you say, leaving the door open when you turn around to grab a sweatshirt and slip on your shoes. You catch Dave trying to peer inside.

“How come you never let anyone in here?” he says as you push him outside, closing the door behind you.

“Because it’s a tiny single dorm, and because maybe I like having some fucking privacy every once in awhile?”

“Privacy for fucking what?” Dave asks, just standing there and not even walking down the hall, so you aggressively lead the way back to his room.

“Wallowing in my own worthlessness, not being judged for my superior taste in comedians-” he scoffs at you- “and letting my miserable titties be free and unconstrained by the spandex nightmare prison I inflict on them on a daily basis, among other things.”

Dave starts laughing, in that breath-catching kind of way you’ve learned he does when he thinks something is really funny.

“The fuck are you giggling about?” you say, whipping around to face him and stopping you both dead in your tracks.

This catches him off guard, you think, because his face kind of goes slack before he answers. “Nothin’ just… dude you got a fucking hilarious way with words, you know that? Spandex nightmare prison? That’s gold.” He starts to walk past you. “Also ‘titties’ is a really funny word on it’s own, so.”

You roll your eyes and follow him down the hall, inwardly smirking to yourself over the fact that apparently your ‘way with words’ could get a genuine laugh out of this douche.

==> Be Dave.

When John tells you to go get Karkat, you’re not exactly surprised to be greeted in the crabbiest way imaginable. Being called a dipshit might have scared or angered other people, you think, but you mostly just find it funny.
Karkat had that about him, a way to somehow get the realest most belly-laugh ass fucking chuckles out you. You’re not a loud laughter but this short motherfucker just flippantly referring to his own chest is enough to almost make you cackle, which was, admittedly, a little embarrassing.

Without an easy TV/couch setup to work with, the three of you end up sitting on your bed, long-ways, with John’s laptop plopped in your lap where you sit in between him and Karkat.

“Why’s my crotch gotta be the designated movie-holder?” you ask, watching as John struggles to open a bag of miniature chocolate bars.

Karkat snatches it away from him before ripping it open with his teeth. You watch in awe as dark and milk chocolate alike spills out onto both your laps.

John retrieves the bag, eyeing the jagged opening in the plastic. “Cause you’re in the middle,” he says simply, looking right at you as he unwraps a piece and pops it into his mouth. You bump him hard with your elbow, smirking as he’s almost pushed over, and don’t say anything more.

You press play on the first Ghostbusters movie and sit back while it starts up, John and Karkat’s eyes fixed on the screen, but yours wandering. Out of the corner of your eye you can see Karkat’s hands in his lap, legs folded up criss-cross applesauce style.

They’re small, like the rest of him, and look sort of…

Soft.

How someone’s hands can ‘look’ soft becomes one of those sort of tangents you start going on in your mind, your thoughts somehow going from how you perceive sensory information to whether or not you think dogs should be able to vote (you do). By the end of it a good deal of the movie’s beginning has passed, and you have no idea what’s going on.

So your eyes wander again.

You see Karkat tear open a piece of candy with his teeth (again with the teeth, just use your hands, fucking hell) and you have that thought you had a while ago about his canines, and you wonder why you apparently consider sharp teeth to be an attractive trait.

That thought comes to such a sharp halt in your head you get metaphorical whiplash, or maybe a more real and tangible kind of whiplash, because you sort of feel like someone punched you in the neck.

You’re distracted briefly by the fact that you know what that feels like.

But inevitably you come back to dwelling on how you consciously thought of another boy as being attractive. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that you’re back to denying that that happened.

You glance over at John. He brings a bottle of water up to his lips and you find yourself watching his adam’s apple bob as he drinks.

Fuck.

You stare ahead and try to make sense of the plot of this movie because apparently you can’t look at any boy without fixating on some random trait or inexplicably being attracted to random pieces of his anatomy. For the remainder of the movie you attempt to do the same thing to the secretary lady with the glasses. You almost convince yourself that you like the shape of her lips.
Halfway through The Wicker Man - which you are actually immensely enjoying, in that ‘Nic Cage is Objectively Funny Just On His Own’ kind of way, and because ironically watching bad ‘horror’ movies is way more fun than watching what is supposed to be a cult classic - you look over at John and see that he’s been dozing off for the last minute or so. You look at Karkat and realize that he is literally asleep, just straight up passed out. On your bed.

For a second you do nothing but admire how someone can fall asleep while sitting up against a concrete wall, head lolled to the side in a way that definitely looks uncomfortable, if not impossible. You push on his shoulder in an attempt to wake him.

He slumps over and flops onto your pillow, short legs curled up in front of him, turning him into a ball up on the top of your bed.

On the other side of you, John makes a sound like he had just woken up from two seconds of slumber. You sigh and close the laptop.

Pushing John and his numerous discarded candy wrappers off your bed is relatively easy. He takes his laptop and puts it on his desk before climbing into his own bed and mumbling something about being sorry that he fell asleep. You tell him to get some shuteye.

Removing Karkat is a different story, because this kid is either way heavier than he looks or is steadfastly sleep-determined to remain in the same spot despite all your efforts to either wake him up or straight up just push him off so he lands on the floor.

The truth is, though, is that maybe you weren’t trying very hard in the first place.

You shut off the lights and brush off the last few bits of candy and plastic left in your bed before carefully, slowly, and very awkwardly, laying down. As if one of your tiniest movements now could wake him up, when shaking him did nothing. Your head hits the pillow just a few inches away from Karkat and you can feel just the tiniest bit of his breath on your face.

He shifts slightly and a thick lock of black hair falls in his face. Without even thinking, you reach up to brush it aside, your fingertips just barely caressing his forehead. Something tightens in your chest.

You steal one of John’s extra pillows and sleep on the floor.

== Be Karkat.

November brings with it frozen dew in the mornings and wind whipping rain against your window at night. The sun dips below the horizon at around 5pm now, so when you come back to your dorm at the end of the day it’s coated in darkness.

You flick your desk light on, a cheap bendy kind of thing that came with the room. Maybe too dim, you think, but you’ll take it over the overhead light, with it’s bright blueish glow that makes your head throb after a while.

The closer you get to the deadline of your group project with Jade and Dave, the more anxiety starts to edge in on your peripheral. You open your laptop on your desk and decide to bother them about it.

-- carcinoGeneticist opened memo on board NANCHO PARTY. --

CG: OKAY, FIRST OF ALL, I WANT TO SAY AGAIN.
CG: HOW MUCH I HATE THAT DAVE WAS IN CHARGE OF NAMING THIS.
turntechGodhead responded to memo.
TG: okay ignoring the dumb idea that a sbahj reference isn't objectively the best option for a board
TG: sorry refrage
TG: you know you can just change it right
CG: IGNORING THE DUMB IDEA THAT ANYTHING YOU SAY IS RELEVANT OR HELPFUL, MORE LIKE.
CG: LET’S PRETEND THAT I DON’T NOT KNOW HOW TO DO THAT.
CG: WHICH I DO, FOR THE RECORD.
CG: WHAT WOULD I HAVE TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THEN???
TG: idk like literally anything else
gargenGnostic responded to memo.
GG: hey guys!
GG: oh no is this just one of those memos where karkat just complains a whole lot :(?
TG: p much jade
TG: id go so far as to say that youre better off just going back to whatever you were doing
CG: NO, YOU ARE NOT.
CG: AND “WHATEVER YOU WERE DOING” HOW MUCH DO YOU WANNA BET THAT JADE WAS SLEEPING, DAVE?
CG: AKA WHAT SHE SEEMS TO BE DOING LITERALLY WHenever I NEED HER.
TG: hey now
GG: its not my fault im so sleepy :(;
CG: WHOSE FAULT IS IT THEN???
CG: BECAUSE IF I DIDN’T KNOW ANY BETTER, I’D THINK YOU WERE JUST DOING IT TO PISS ME OFF!
CG: HOW MUCH OF THE POWERPOINT DO YOU HAVE DONE?
GG: all of it!
GG: not that that really matters though because youre just going to change everything when i show it to you :/
CG: I WOULDN’T HAVE TO CHANGE ANYTHING IF YOU WOULD DO IT RIGHT IN THE FIRST PLACE!
TG: dude chill
TG: youre obviously way too hung up about doing this in the most perfect way possible to the point where youre basically doing everything yourself
TG: because you think were shit
TG: but in actuality everything were doing is fine youre just bein kind of a dick
CG: WOW, OK
CG: BEING TOLD I’M A DICK BY THE BIGGEST DICK OF THEM ALL, THE IRONY!
CG: THAT’S YOUR THING, ISN’T IT?
GG: ugh guys why do we always end up here
GG: this arguing stuff isnt doing anyone any good
TG: its good for a laugh at least
TG: when hes not insulting us
GG: hehe true
CG: I’M GLAD YOU THINK IT’S FUNNY, GUYS!
CG: UNLIKE THE BOTH OF YOU, I ACTUALLY CARE ABOUT DOING WELL IN SCHOOL.
CG: SO HILARIOUS!
GG: ughh
GG: we care too were just not being rude and bossy about it!
CG: IF I WASN’T BEING “RUDE” AND “BOSSY” WHERE WOULD WE BE?
CG: DAVE STILL HASN’T EVEN READ THE BOOK WE’RE DOING THE PROJECT ON, AND PROBABLY NEVER WILL.
TG: dude thats what sparknotes is for
CG: BUT HE AT LEAST JUST SITS THERE AND LISTENS FOR THE MOST PART, WHILE YOU WASTE MY TIME COMPLAINING ABOUT MY TONE.

GG: so its good that dave “just sits there and listens” but at the same time you're also mad at us for not trying hard enough or not doing enough work or not doing something exactly the way you would do it?

GG: ugh and here we go again with the mindless arguing! i wouldn't have agreed to do this with you if i knew you were gonna act like this >:(

TG: fuck yes drag him jade

CG: I WOULDN'T “ACT LIKE THIS” IF YOU TWO WEREN'T SO INSUFFERABLE AND USELESS!!!!

TG: jesus fuck dude

TG: okay your blood pressure is obviously way too high rn so maybe just take a sec to chill out

TG: we've been slowly workin on this thing since it was assigned so as far as im concerned were way ahead of schedule

TG: by next wednesday well have everything done and do really well on the oral presentation because you made jade the speaker and jade is good at speaking

GG: :)

TG: then well all fuck off to our respective homes for the long weekend and eat turkey and get trampled at walmart or whatever it is people do this time of year

CG: THE FACT THAT YOU DON’T PUT AN APOSTROPHE IN THE WORD “WE’LL” IS REALLY STARTING TO PISS ME OFF.

TG: okay fine whatever be pissed off at me for that small and meaningless thing

TG: do that instead of yelling at jade for no reason and stressing out over things you dont gotta stress out about

CG: GOD, COULD YOU BE ANY MORE CONDESCENDING RIGHT NOW???

CG: I'M SORRY I'M NOT THE “TOO COOL FOR SCHOOL” DOUCHE IN SUNGLASSES LIKE YOU ARE AND ACTUALLY EXPERIENCE SCHOOL ANXIETY AND WORRY ABOUT MY GRADES.

CG: THAT WAS A SARCASTIC APOLOGY, BTW.

CG: I WILL APOLOGIZE TO JADE, THOUGH, BECAUSE SHE AT LEAST HAS THE DECENCY TO CARE ABOUT THINGS ON SOME LEVEL, INSTEAD OF TRYING TO BE AN APATHETIC STRAIGHT-FACED FUCK DUMPSTER.

CG: SO, SORRY JADE.

GG: thank you karkat :P

CG: NOW I'M BANNING YOU BOTH SO WE CAN ACTUALLY GET SOMETHING DONE TONIGHT.

CG banned GG from responding to memo.
CG banned TG from responding to memo.

CG closed memo.

You exit Pesterchum with a huff, you always are quick to being worked up over nothing, aren’t you?
You’d never admit it, but as much as you like to yell at Dave over text, he does tend to have a way with calming you down.

Because everything he said turned out to be true. The three of you finish the project without even having to stay up late the night before, and you agree to volunteer to be the first presenters just to get everything over with. It goes well, great, actually, and before you know it you’re throwing a bunch of your clothes into a backpack and getting ready to head to the airport.

None of that changes the fact that Dave seems to be sort of… angry with you? As much as you think a guy like that can be angry with someone. Ever since Halloween he’s been ignoring you, you’re pretty sure. And even though you apologized to Jade you can’t shake the feeling that he’s pissed at
you for how you talked to her. Which, yeah. You were stressed and… you don’t have any other excuse except that you generally believe yourself to be an unlikable asshole, for the most part.

So when you see him in the distance at the Sea-Tac airport you decide not to wave at him, or go up to him, or do anything that isn’t making sure he doesn’t see you. Ignoring him in turn.

Which will only serve to exacerbate the situation, but you decide that that’s a problem for future you.

==> Be Dave.

You say bye to John before leaving campus, duffle bag filled with a few shirts and jeans and a plane ticket folded up in your pocket.

Down the hall is Karkat’s room. You know he’s going to the airport, too, but you can’t bring yourself to go with him, to hang out while waiting for the shuttle to show up, to even say goodbye.

Being around him brings up the same kind of feelings you had when you laid down next to him on Halloween. The way your chest felt, wound up tight and heavy. The way you felt when you decided to sleep on the floor- regretful?

You’re not sure, you don’t know. You don’t know, you don’t know, you don’t know. How you feel, that is. Why you feel what you feel, or even what it is you’re feeling.

It’s way easier to just ignore everything, including Karkat. Luckily (or not) he seems to be doing the same thing back. This kind of awkwardness was preferable to the kind of awkwardness you felt when you caught yourself looking at his mouth and wondering if his teeth could cut your lips.

You’re getting pretty tired of all this vaguely homoerotic shit intruding into your mindspace. So you ignore. Way easier, at least for now.

You rest your head against the window of the bus taking you to the airport. The glass vibrates and bumps against your skull as the ride goes on, but it’s also cool to the touch, which is sort of comfortable, in a weird way.

You let out a shaky breath. Come next morning, you’ll be waking up in your bedroom in Texas. Which is honestly what you’re looking forward to the most, some true alone time. Your room was always a mess but it’s a familiar mess, and you can’t wait to be done with traveling and whatever Bro has in store to welcome you back so you can just relax.

You wonder if he’ll even be there to welcome you back. It’s not like you two ever actually celebrated Thanksgiving, this break is just a chance for you to do nothing and not have to worry about school for a few days.

The shuttle stops outside the airport and you head inside, checking in and finding your gate. This stuff turned out to be way easier than you thought, especially considering you had to figure it all out yourself.

Once you get on the plane you decide to put on your headphones and stop wondering about what awaits you at home. When the plane lands you’ll take a taxi to the apartment and you’ll find out.

The music blaring in your ears doesn’t make it any easier to stop the worrying in the back of your mind.
You land in DC at about four in the morning, head heavy after a poor night of sleep. Sleeping on planes was already hard enough without having to try to do it next to a screaming baby and a teenager who is certainly almost deaf now from how loudly their music was playing from their earbuds.

Maybe if you had landed at four in the evening like a relatively normal person who wasn’t desperately trying to get the cheapest fare possible, you could meet your dad after his office job in the city and head home with him. But that was also assuming your dad wasn’t the type to work and be gone literally all day.

Right now he was probably getting up for the day, putting on his dadliest button-down shirt and drinking coffee out of a cup that honestly should say ‘world’s okay-est dad’ on it but instead has a really stupid looking crab and the logo for a seafood restaurant adorning the front.

You take your bag, just the backpack this time, no need to bring an entire suitcase for less than a week long trip, and head to the metro adjacent to the airport. Still tucked away in your wallet is a card filled up with about fifteen dollars, the advertisement for the national zoo on the front probably outdated by more than a couple years. You press it to the sensor at the ticket gate and the wedge-like apparatus opens up, letting you through.

The platform at the airport is exposed to the open air instead of being underground like most other stations. You shiver as you wait around for the first train of the day to arrive, the sun still well below the horizon and your breath coming out in little foggy puffs. At least being above ground gives you the opportunity to fuck around on your phone while you still have a connection, but surprise surprise, no one’s on Pesterchum at this ungodly hour.

You didn’t wear your binder on the airplane because you thought you’d be able to sleep, so you shift around uncomfortably as you try to make your chest look as inconspicuous as possible. Not that there was anyone around to even see you, except that half-asleep woman in a suit on a bench a few yards away from you and the dead-eyed college student pacing circles around one of the concrete pillars of the station. Oh wait, that’s you.

Eventually a train pulls up and signals the doors opening with a little chime. You make sure that the station it’s heading to is the correct one- god, you’d hate to end up in fucking Virginia again- before stepping on and taking a seat in the back.

The metro is a lot more busy when you get off to transfer to the red line. People of all types bustle around, but it’s mostly smartly dressed people with briefcases in hand and a quick pace, pushing around each other in their rush to work. You pile onto a car that’s almost full, so instead of sitting down you stand near the door. Which you usually prefer to do anyway, but the whole binder thing has left you stubbornly refusing to uncross your arms in front of your chest. So you spend the next
thirty minutes almost losing your balance and falling over until you finally arrive at your stop. Because of course you do.

The train comes up above ground and again you yawn to pop your ears, the still-dark sky tinged grey with incoming rain clouds passing by. You’re back in Maryland, now, the familiar scenery speeding by in blurry colors and shapes. When you get off at your stop the cool morning sun has only just started to rise.

One bus ride later you’re stepping out onto the sidewalk in front of the neighborhood you grew up in. You walk right across mowed, dewy lawns and up the steps to the front door of a small townhouse tucked between two bigger and better kept townhouses. You find a key under the plain doormat and fit it into the lock, struggling for a second to get it to actually work. Eventually it clicks and you head inside.

And everything is suddenly so, so familiar, it’s as if you just got back home from a sleepover at Sollux’s instead of a months-long stay across the country. You take off your shoes, letting them drop messily onto the floor in the entryway, then throw your bag at the bottom of the stairs. You wander into the kitchen and find the coffee pot still on, about a cup or two left for you to drink.

Which is, honestly, exactly what you were hoping to find, but that doesn’t stop you from mentally berating your dad for leaving a fucking coffee pot on while he was at work.

You fix yourself a cup of coffee with hazelnut creamer you find in the fridge, pouring it into a square-ish sort of pale blue cup that you always liked to pick over the others, for some reason. It fits into your hands nicely and starts to warm them up, the cold air outside having done it’s absolute best to sting whatever skin you dared expose to the elements.

Outside of the kitchen is a messy little living room, still barely lived in compared to what state your friends could leave it in when you had them over. You plop down onto a grey L-shaped couch and sink into the cushions, your breath making steam rise up off your coffee when you bring it up to your face.

After a few minutes blissfully spent doing nothing, you decide to head upstairs to your room, dragging your bag up the steps and noisily drinking your coffee. Even if no one’s around to witness you, that won’t stop you from being grumpy about having to go up stairs when you’re tired.

Your room is more or less the same as you left it; you suspect that your dad may have tidied up a bit, or at least dusted away the months worth of dust left to build up while you were gone. You set your coffee cup onto your desk, a cheap piece of furniture with cluttered shelves full of books and old computer games, before flopping face-first onto your bed.

The double-sized mattress creaks beneath you, groaning when you roll over to look up at the ceiling. A single glow-in-the-dark star remains from when you stuck a whole pack of them up there as a kid. On the wall to your left is a poster of Will Smith, circa 1992, the tape holding it up somehow still clinging to the plaster wall after all these years.

You let out a long sigh, the feeling of being home enveloping you like a blanket fresh from the dryer. The familiar scent of your room, barely noticeable to your own nose, the wind tapping the screen against your bedroom window, the cars driving down the busy street outside, tires cutting through pavement wet with rain.

Somewhere, in all of that, you fall asleep.

==> Be Dave.
After a very uneventful night of traveling, you arrive at your apartment building at around two in the morning. You awkwardly thank the taxi driver and pay him with what little you have in your wallet.

Inside the building is dark and musty and the elevator has a very polite sign informing you that it’s out of service, which is perfect, considering you live on the highest floor. You don’t let out a sigh or a groan or anything like that; instead, you silently walk to the stairwell, open the door, and begin your ascent.

Cool guys don’t flip out over elevators. Cool guys have no problem walking up ten flights of stairs. God, it was funny in a way, wasn’t it? Going up the stairs. Didn’t someone warn you about them? Dude should’ve told you about the elevator.

After about three flights your legs already hurt, but you’ve made this trip many times before, so you decide to suck it up. You adjust your shades to fit more tightly and higher up on your face, your eyes obscured under the dark glass. Invulnerable.

All that walking up stairs gives you plenty of time to anticipate reaching the top, to anticipate seeing your bro again. You have to admit, now that you’re finally here, you do feel excited to see him. This is a shitty apartment building without a working elevator and you’re having a shitty time walking up all these goddamn stairs, your bag weighing down on your shoulder, your knees begging for relief. But it is a familiar sort of shitty, and well, if that isn’t what being home was always like. If that isn’t worth it to make it to the top, if only for the familiarity.

You get to the door and twist your copy of the key in the lock, cold and hard in your fingers, the inner metal workings of the knob clicking as you do. You open the door.

And…

Nothing.

You check everywhere, every room, even going up for a cursory glance at the roof, but he isn’t here. There’s no note pinned to the fridge when you walk into the kitchen, only a felt puppet turning to face you, the camera inside recording your blank face. You let out a long sigh.

The tenseness in your shoulders gives way to a nauseating weight in your stomach. You go to open the refrigerator, carelessly, in case there might be some food left for you-- you are starving, after all--but instead what you get is a single steak knife clattering down the empty wire racks. You reach out to stop it, out of reflex, really, because why would you want to try to catch a knife? Your mind just barely registers your mistake as you’re already making it.

You end up shoving your thumb into the blade, not even catching its fall, just sort of hitting it out of the way, really. When the pain hits you you inhale in a way that’s like you’re not breathing at all, the air gets all stuck inside of you, your body too tense to let it come back out.

It’s a small cut but the tip of your thumb bleeds and bleeds and bleeds and you go to stick it under the tap from the sink because you vaguely feel like that’s what you’re supposed to do. You don’t actually know. You watch numbly as the blood washes away, revealing a bright red line in your skin.

You decide to see if you still have any snacks stashed away in your closet.

Your bedroom is… not how you left it. You noticed that when you were looking for your bro. All the furniture is still in place; your bed, your desk with the cinderblocks, your turntable. On your bed is a haphazard pile of smuppets, each one equally bulbous and disgusting to look at. Across the room
is a tripod, camera missing, set up just next to a red stain in the carpet. Great. Your bro used your room as the backdrop to many a puppet snuff films, apparently.

You gather up the pile on your bed and throw it out into the hallway, shutting the door with a familiar sense of satisfaction. Your room isn’t a likely place for surprise strifes or sneak attacks, so you let your guard down just a tiny bit.

In the closet, under an old pile of jeans, you find two bags of nacho cheese Doritos-- one normal sized and one fun-sized-- an empty bottle of apple juice, two cups of applesauce, and a box of cinnamon sugar Poptarts. The applesauce is… probably fine? You peel back the foil lid and it smells alright to you, so you pour it directly into your mouth. Because who needs silverware, anyway.

Your thumb still hurts.

You ignore it and sit down at your desk, the desktop computer still hooked up but long since been turned off. The power button leaves dust on your fingertip when you press it, but the machine still comes to life despite the neglect.

-- ectoBiologist began pestering turntechGodhead at 02:43 --

EB: you get back home yet?
TG: sure fucking did
TG: my bro isn’t here and the elevator doesn’t work and i just had to remove a shitload of smut puppets from my bed
TG: also i cut my thumb open opening the refrigerator
TG: home sweet home
TG: …
TG: sorry that sounded way grumpier than i meant it to
EB: your bro’s not there?
TG: no idk where the fuck he is m
TG: anyways shouldn’t you be asleep or something i thought staying up way too late was my deal
EB: it’s not even one yet!
TG: oh right time zones
TG: i literally never remember those are a thing for some reason
TG: probably easy for me since im right in the middle of you and rose
TG: i wonder how jade must feel all the way out in the fuckdamn ocean
TG: did she go back there btw
EB: no she’s here with me, to spend the break eating all the turkey we can stuff in our faces.
EB: she’s my sister, remember?
TG: k and thats relevant why
EB: have you ever heard of good old family time? it’s thanks giving we’re like contractually obligated to spend it together.
TG: im sure thats nice and all but dont come at me with that family time bullshit ok
TG: can you even IMAGINE what eating a meal must be like with the lalondes because i absolutely do not want to
TG: fuck and with my bro there too thatd be such a disaster
EB: hehe
EB: i bet it would be fun, in a really chaotic and sort of dangerous way. :B
TG: dude the turkey wouldn’t even get made probably
TG: idt get served straight up frozen with a katana shoved up its ass
TG: mom lalonde would burn the house down going overboard with the mom routine
TG: trying to bake fifteen pumpkin pies at once
TG: all the while rose would be psychoanalyzing me and slash or my bro
TG: shed combust after not being able to figure him the fuck out because he is to psychology as dark matter is to astronomy its just a fuckin mystery
TG: so then so far we have two lalondes that are on fire
TG: and the turkeys not even thawed
EB: dave that was a whole lot of words that didn’t really make any sense at all.
TG: sorry im kinda out of it im like really cold
EB: isn’t texas supposed to be warm though?
EB: or like, warmer than washington, at least.
TG: and like the insides of my ears are really hot its weird i feel weird
EB: uh,
EB: are you sick or something?
EB: dave?
TG: brb

-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 03:01 --

Something tight and hot works its way up your neck and you push away from your desk, knock your chair back as you stand up. You walk more upright and stable to the bathroom than you thought you’d be able to, and the cold tile under your feet feels unnatural against your skin.

Right, what’s happening exactly? You try to think it through as you lift up the lid to the toilet and stand over it. You’re pretty sure you’re going to throw up, which isn’t a sensation you’re very familiar with, to be honest, and you don’t really… know how to go about this?

You stand over the toilet for a few moments longer, the tight heat in your throat and neck and head, and the burning in your ears, and the clamminess of your skin, all swimming around you but nothing coming of it, not yet. You really don’t… want to actually have to do it. Another minute goes by, and you listen intently to see if maybe your bro would conveniently decide to come home right now.

The motions of getting on your knees and bracing yourself against the bowl are played out with such an intense sense of reluctance that you’re surprised that you manage to get it done at all. You end up spending like ten minutes coughing without anything happening except your head somehow feeling even heavier, and, fuck, you’re going to have to-- goddammit, just do it, you guess. You stick your fingers down your throat.

When what you were intending to happen, well, happens, it takes you by surprise, because you both didn’t want it to work and didn’t want to do it in the first place. You vomit up what was probably expired applesauce for what seems like way longer than you should be able to, then spend what is probably an eternity retching and dry heaving.

Your whole body is sore by the end of it, so you go straight to bed, flopping onto the mattress feeling heavier than you ought to. What a goddamn ordeal.

…

When you wake up the sun is shining through your blinds, painting the room in strips of golden light. You lift up a lazy hand and watch the light play on your fingers as your brain struggles to come to terms with being conscious again. And when you’re awake, in that moment in your room, with the light in your eyes and your heart beating steadily, you breathe in deeply through your nose and feel a sense of calmness wash over you.

In the other room there’s a creaking sound, unmistakably your brother’s futon being folded up, and your eyes snap wide open.
You step outside your room.

“Hey,” you say, almost with a smile. You think better of it.

He regards you with just the slightest nod of his head. He doesn’t say anything, and the silence hangs over you. Your fault.

The next thing you see is the light reflecting off his sword.

==> Be Karkat.

Somebody is… knocking on your door. The house door. The front door of the house. That’s downstairs.

After being away at a dorm for so long your mind struggles to process the sound, which only makes it louder and louder, as whoever’s trying to get you to answer gets increasingly more impatient.

You stumble down the stairs in the same clothes you were wearing when you got home, slightly wrinkly after having passed out in them. Once you get to the front hall you’re awake enough to be incredibly petty about answering this person, so instead of opening the door right away, you decide to take your time.

Terezi is still banging on your door when you look through the peephole and see her face. When you open the door she doesn’t register the sound in time and ends up smacking you in the face.

“Thanks,” you say as she tumbles towards you, wrapping her arms tight around your neck and whatever else she can reach.

“Sorry,” she says, laughing. You place your hands on her back and hug her close, and she starts swinging you both from side-to-side.

“Jesus fuck, you two,” says another voice, and shit, you didn’t even realize he was here too, but when you part from Terezi you can see Sollux rolling his eyes.

“Hey,” you say to him, and he gives you a fist bump.

“Sup.”

“Fuck, it’s weird seeing you guys,” you blurt out. You spent pretty much your whole life living in the same neighborhood as your friends but being away for a few months was enough to somehow make it feel odd to see their faces.

“It’s weird seeing you, too!” Terezi cackles, before reaching out to touch your face, rough and grasping, fingers everywhere. “Are you smiling? I think you’re smiling.”

“Shut up.”

“Dude, can we like, come in or are we all just going to stand out here in this pitiful rain?” Sollux says, and without waiting for you to answer, he walks inside, Terezi following closely behind.

“Where’s everyone else?” you ask as you shut the door.

“Still on their way home, or off doing their own things, I don’t know,” Sollux answers. He removes a pair of chunky glasses from his face and wipes them off on his shirt. “Sorry the ‘welcome Karkat home’ party is only a party of two,” he says, voice absolutely dripping with sarcasm.
“I did not want, nor did I ask for, a ‘welcome Karkat home’ party and frankly!” you say, stepping closer to him, “so far I’ve only just been rudely woken up and manhandled by a blind girl, so I’d say it pretty much sucks ass!”

Terezi pokes you in the back with her cane. “Don’t pretend that you don’t love my hugs. I’m the best hugger this side of the Potomac, and you--” she pokes you again “--are only just getting what you deserve.”

“What, to be fucking squeezed to death?”

She flashes you a wicked smile. “Yes.”

“I thought Kanaya would be here at least,” you say, “but I guess she’s probably working right now.”

“Yeah, that reminds me,” Sollux says, placing his glasses back on his face after inspecting them in the light. “I have to fuck off to my own job in a little bit, sorry KK.”

You let out a little huff of a laugh. “Dude, I don’t give a fuck, go get paid telling old ladies to turn their computer on and off again or whatever the hell it is you do at Best Buy.”

“I mostly just work the register,” he mumbles. “But I’ll be sure to find the time on my shift to be as condescending as possible to an elderly woman, just for you, Karkat.” He flutters his eyelashes at you.

You roll your eyes.

Later you decide to actually get dressed for the day, quickly, as you’re pretty sure you can hear Sollux and Terezi getting up to something in the kitchen. You wriggle into half-tank binder, taking a second to adjust your breasts underneath, then rummage through your closet, finding a grey flannel and a loose black sweater to go over it. Because, fuck, it’s cold outside, and the layering makes you look even flatter in the chest, which you’ll always take. The sleeves are a little long for you-- men’s shirts almost always are-- but there’s a certain comfort in being able to curl your hands under the extra fabric.

Terezi throws something at you when you come back down stairs, and after barely catching it you see it’s a bright red beanie.

“The fuck am I supposed to do with this?”

“Wear it! So I can tell where the fuck you are,” she replies with a grin.

She hasn’t been able to see more than very blurry spots of color for many, many years. Sometimes you wonder what it must be like to not be able to make out the details in a person’s face or read letters in a book, things you don’t even have to think about. Terezi was never one to be down about it, though, and if anything, she’s pretty damn proud of her disability.

“Also, so you won’t be cold, because we’re gonna walk into town.”

“We are?”

Apparently you are, but not before stopping down the street at Terezi’s place after saying bye to Sollux, because there’s something she’s just dying to show you.

And that something is named Paarthurnax.
As soon as she opens the door you’re greeted with a very wiggly and furry creature seemingly determined to climb you like a tree. It puts its paws up on your shoulders, and you’re face-to-face with a fully grown German Shepherd.

“I got a dog!!!” Terezi exclaims.

“You got a dog,” you say numbly as a large wet tongue licks your face.

“Down,” she says, sternly, and to your surprise the dog actually does get off of you, sitting down in the doorway with a happy smile on its face.

“Is he trained?” you ask, offering a hand to let him sniff it.

“Mmhmm!” she says, walking inside. Terezi’s house was always a bit messy, in a cozy sort of way, with colorful rugs covering the floor and jewel-toned paint on the walls. She pulls a red harness and a short, strong-looking leash out of a nearby closet. “Here, help me put this on him.”

You take the harness and do as she says, lifting the dogs feet to go into the little arm holes. “He’s a guide dog?”

“Yeah, he’s fucking awesome, too.” She leans down and takes his face in her hands, giving him kisses all over. “I’ve been wanting a dog for a while, and since I’m transferring to university next year, my mom let me get one. He’ll be able to let me walk around campus on my own, and stuff like that.”

“And you named him after a dragon. Of fucking course.” You hook the leash on him and let her take it, and the dog immediately leads her to the door.

You put on the red beanie, letting your bangs hang out in the front, and Terezi wraps a long knitted teal scarf around her neck, and the two-- sorry, three-- of you all start walking.

The neighborhood that you live in is right off of main street, about a mile away from old town, which is where you’re going today. The rain has let up, but the sidewalk and trees are still wet. Little droplets of water fall onto you as you walk under old elms.

Things are different here than in Washington. Older. There’s more brick buildings, little and narrow, and the street lamps are small and black, with ornate bulbs and peeling paint.

“So, how is community college?” you ask Terezi, once you’re about halfway down the block.

“Oh, you know. Pretty much like high school, ‘cept my classes are more spread out.” She pauses for a moment. “I started talking to Vriska again.”

“What?” you ask, whipping your head to look up at her.

“Yeah…” she starts, quietly. You come to a crosswalk and press the button, an electronic voice telling you over and over to wait. “We have some classes together, and I just-- I don’t know. I feel like maybe I was too quick to drop her.”

You let out a frustrated sigh. “Well, I’m not going to try to control who you’re friends with, but be careful, okay? She’s hurt you pretty badly in the past.”

You watch as she raises her brows behind her red frames. “When did you get so mature, crabby pants? I was half-expecting you to flip off the fucking handle.”
The light changes and Paarthurnax starts pulling her across the street. “Maybe I’m a little more grown up these days? I’m eighteen, for fuck’s sake. And I’m a little less of a moody asshole after, well, you know, starting the whole transition thing. And don’t—” you punctuate this by poking her in the arm “--call me crabby pants.”

She proceeds to call you crabby pants about thirteen more times on the way to town.

You both decide that the best use of your time is hanging around the Starbucks outside Jo-Ann Fabrics while waiting for Kanaya’s shift to be over. And because it isn’t fall until you’ve both bought overpriced pumpkin flavored coffee.

When you step inside after Terezi and her dog and order your drinks, you turn around and pick out a very familiar head of white hair sitting at a table in the back.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” you blurt out to Rose, who looks up at you while sipping her drink.

“Good to see you, too,” she says coolly. Which, yeah. Not exactly the nicest greeting, or even a greeting at all, but still, your question still stands.

“Who is this? Who are you talking to?” Terezi asks as she comes up behind you.

Rose is wearing a very striking shade of black lipstick and sharp winged eyeliner, a lavender cardigan over a lace blouse, and has a deep purple scarf wrapped loosely around her neck. To Terezi she’s just a vaguely gothic purple blob with white hair.

“Rose Lalonde,” she says, seeming to take note of the eyewear and the dog, putting the pieces together. “Karkat and I are classmates. Nice to meet you.”

“Terezi.” She offers a hand in the general direction of the other girl, who shakes it politely.

“Rose,” you interject. “Please tell me, what exactly brings you to this specific Starbucks, in this specific town, specifically in Maryland, some two hundred fucking miles away from where you’re supposed to be right now.”

She takes another drink, smirking. “What do you think?”

You huff, crossing your arms across your chest. “I wouldn’t have set you up with Kanaya if I knew that you’d be fucking invading my hometown in due time.”

She raises her brows, but doesn’t say anything. Across the room, a barista announces one pumpkin spice latte, for Karkat.

“Don’t,” you say when Rose opens her mouth to comment.

==> Be Dave.

There’s a tingling sensation in your hands, spreading up through your arms and lasting throughout the day. After that initial match with Bro, the vibrations of metal on metal never seemed to go away, and you rub absently at your wrist to try to soothe it.

He brings you some shitty breakfast from McDonald’s, which normally you’d scarf down immediately because hey, when do you ever get warm food around here, but you still feel sick and gross from last night. You mention this to Bro and he doesn’t say anything, leaving you to wonder why you’d even tell him something like that in the first place. But whatever.
It’s around 5pm when you realize you’re not really… sure? What happened today? You think you spent it in your room, and you’re pretty sure that you talked to John and maybe Rose? No, you didn’t talk to Rose.

You squeeze your eyes shut and rub at your temples. Blurry, barely-remembered days aren’t exactly out of the ordinary, are they? You’re sitting down at your desk with one of the bags of chips from your closet— your dinner, probably— when you hear the front door shut.

Bro has apparently gone somewhere, you’re not sure where, but if that means you’ll have the place to yourself for the rest of the night then you’re not complaining. Not that you leave your room or have plans outside of staying on the computer until like three in the morning, but still.

Whenever he comes back, you’re sure he’ll want to spar again. You were pretty sloppy in that last match, and he said as much. You bit back a comment on how there weren’t exactly any opportunities for practicing swordfighting at college, that would’ve just made the lecture worse.

The next day you remind yourself that you’ve been meaning to get a proper jacket for the weather in Washington, because damn, they weren’t kidding about the rain. Just when you’re wondering if you should ask your Bro, you hear the front door open.

“Sup,” you say, walking into the main room.

He doesn’t respond.

“So like,” you start up again, this time getting his attention; he stands squarely and folds his arms across his chest. “Before I go back can I get, like, a coat or something?”

“What.”

“Like, uh, a raincoat or something, I don’t know. It’s rainy as shit in Seattle.”

“A raincoat.”

“Y-yeah?”

You can feel him staring at you from behind his shades and something burns hot and deep in your chest. Why the fuck are you asking him this? What are you doing?

A minute passes. Why is he taking so long to say anything? No, you know why, he’s thinking. Long and hard about what to say to you for coming up to him, for asking such a childish and dumb question. Or maybe thinking about where to strike you, whether or not you could defend yourself. You don’t think you could. You don’t think you would.

“Are you really so fucking weak now that you can’t handle some goddamn precipitation.”

It’s not a question. You know the answer. You don’t move a muscle, don’t even blink.

“Yeah, I’ll go up to Wal-Mart, pick you something out. What color do you want, pink? Purple?”

“Dude,” you say. Fuck, no, don’t talk.

“What?” he asks. He takes a step towards you. “What did you say?”

“Why are you… you breath out. He’s only about two feet away from you. “I just wondered if like… Why are you being like this?”
The look on his face, you register it even behind the eyewear. You know that was the wrong thing to say. You know that it was talking back. You should’ve kept your fucking mouth shut.

He reaches out with one big hand and clasps it around your neck, your own hands go to grab at his wrist out of instinct. You think he’s looking into your eyes but you can’t bring yourself to meet them, fixing your gaze instead to the side. Watching out of your peripheral.

“I don’t want to hear anything from you about what you think you need. Unless it’s a good, old-fashioned beatdown. Because what you actually need is to toughen the fuck up.”

He lets go and your stomach feels like someone dropped a bag of rocks in there or twisted it all around. Maybe both. You don’t move, you’ve not even sure if you’re breathing. Every muscle in your body is wound up tight under the pressure of him standing before you.

“You won’t even look people in the eye, you never have. You’ve always been weak, insecure, I’m surprised you can even hold a fucking sword. Tell me again, what do you want from me?”

Your lips move but the words struggle to stumble past. “I don’t know.”

“What did I just tell you?”

You shake your head. You don’t know what he wants you to say and you wish he would just tell you; this could go on forever. The blood rushing through your head is too loud to think.

It’s when you lift up your arms to guard your face when you see him move to take a swing at you, when you feel his fist connect with your forearm, that you realize what he wanted you to say.

He knees you in the stomach and you bend over, shades falling off your face and onto the floor.

What you need.

You curl up on the floor but he’s already on top of you, fists beating down. Fragile skin bruising under hands meant to nurture.

What you deserve.

The knuckles of his right hand strike your cheekbone, then he hits you again right in your eye. Your ears are ringing, your body is screaming. You might be crying out, but you’re not sure.

A good, old-fashioned beatdown.

At some point, you black out.

…

When you come to, Bro isn’t in the apartment anymore. You’re still lying in the living room and you have no idea what time it is, but when you stand up and put your shades back on, you decide that you’re not going to stay here any longer.

The path back to your room is riddled with torn puppets and stray throwing stars. You think you hear the sound of a camera moving to follow you, but you don’t care. Your whole body hurts, your eye is swollen shut, it hurts to walk, and you’re leaving.

When you’re packing up what little you have, your eye catches a plastic bag right by your door, with something balled up inside it. You approach it with the same care someone might take when crossing a minefield, but inside is just some brightly colored fabric. You take it out and unfold it.
Not that you’re entirely sure, but you think this might be a My Little Pony raincoat in a girl’s size seven.

Your hands tighten painfully around the polyester sleeves. In one quick motion you stand up and throw your bedroom window open, the coat balled up under your fist.

You yell as you hurl it out the window, watching it fall down, down to the street below, breathing heavily. You’re leaving this place, and you’re high on insubordination.

You go down the stairs feeling light, like if you skipped a few steps you’d just float the rest of the way down. The decision to leave is still only barely thought through but you’re pretty sure that if you had a breaking point that could be found, Bro has fucking shattered it. The sheer magnitude of just how done you are with things outweighs the fear and pain.

Maybe it was going away and coming back that finally did it. Because what happened wasn’t out of the ordinary for the two of you. Because Bro was always quicker to inflict pain on you than comfort you when you’re sick, or get you what you need. Because he’s terrible, terrible, always been terrible, and your veins seem to burn with how much you suddenly hate him. Because you can’t deny anymore that that’s how he feels about you. At least it’s mutual now.

You take a bus to the airport and think about how it’s no wonder that you didn’t really want to come home. How did you always seem to ignore how things are with Bro? You swear there’s been points in the last where you wanted to run away, but the memories are only just now coming back to you, now that you’re actually doing it.

And it feels so goddamn good to be doing it.

==> Be Karkat.

You meet up with Kanaya, exchanging tight hugs despite the tiredness in her eyes, then leave her to have some time alone with Rose. Apparently both she and Sollux are working on Black Friday, and you wish her the best of luck.

In the evening, your dad comes home with bags of food, probably too much for just the two of you on Thanksgiving, but it’s the thought that counts. He gives you a brief hug and asks about college, and you tell him things are fine. Talking with your dad isn’t hard, but it’s not like you have long, meaningful conversations with him.

When the holiday arrives, you spend hours making a poorly constructed, but edible, pumpkin pie, slightly better than last year. Not that you really like the actual act of baking, or have ever been any good at it, but somehow it ended up being expected of you way back when you were daddy’s little girl, and you don’t really have any good reason to stop.

Anyways, the smell of baking pumpkin spice is really, really nice.

When it’s Saturday, and you’re packing up to leave in the morning, you find your mind wandering back to Strider, of all people. Wondering if he’ll still passively ignore you when you get back, or if things will go back to normal. Wondering what you did to push him away in the first place.

Before you leave you make sure to pack some extra clothes; long, warm pairs of socks with knit patterns, the hat Terezi gave you, a long black scarf and matching gloves. You’re not sure how cold it’s going to get in Seattle, but you might as well be prepared.

You take the metro to the airport by yourself, a little more confident after having done it with Kanaya before. DC passes by outside the car windows as you ride over the river, and you find yourself
wishing that you had maybe taken a day to see the city again while you were up here. But, oh well, you’ll have plenty of city to see when you land in Seattle.

You’re still mad about Dave, or rather, confused by his actions. Which makes you mad. During the flight you go over exactly what you’d like to say to him in your head. Like, are you actually ignoring me or am I just imagining things? And, if you are, what the fuck is your problem? Or maybe, how did I fuck up this friendship this time, as I inevitably fuck up all my relationships?

Okay, that last one is a little hard on yourself. Sure, things have never really been the same with her ever since you and Terezi sort-of-almost dated in eighth grade, and after you subsequently and very obviously proceeded to pine after her for two more years. And when you came out as trans there were a few people who sort of just stopped talking to you, oh, and don’t forget how Sollux blew you off for most of senior year of high school to hang out with his girlfriend, and the two of you still haven’t regained the closeness you had before.

Fuck, okay, no. You’re not dealing with this again, you’re not going to lose one of your few friends because you’re too pathetic to confront him for ignoring you. When you get back to campus you’ll go straight to his dorm, knock on the door, tell John to fuck off (if he’s there) and get some answers from this dickbag.

Which won’t be able to happen for a few more hours since you’re still on the plane, so you kind of just stew silently for the remainder of the flight. Because of course you’re not going to get over it in that time span, what do you look like, someone who can manage his anger and insecurities like a normal person?

==> Be Dave.

Arriving at the airport, getting on the plane, landing in Seattle, all of that is just a blur to you, and suddenly you’re back in your dorm room. You’re alone, thank god, because you still haven’t decided how to explain the massive black eye you’re wearing like it’s the latest fall fashion.

You could just brush it off, tell them you walked into a door or you just really sucked at a sparring session with your bro but… that’s not what happened, was it? He hit you, beat you, kept punching even when you were curled up on the ground, because you asked if you could get a coat.

It was enough to make you black out, to make you leave immediately when you woke up. You got to the airport about twelve hours too early but you didn’t even care, you had to get away from that apartment, away from him.

There’s no denying any of that, no more denying how bad he is, but you don’t know if you can be honest to anyone about it, either. How horrified would they be if you relayed that whole series of events to them? What would they say if they knew this wasn’t the first black eye he gave you? How are you going to explain that you’re pretty much done with him, for like, ever.

You’re struck with the realization that you really, truly, might never go back. Seattle is hundreds of miles away from Texas, you could just… not ever go home again.

You don’t want to. You do not want to ever go back to that place or see your brother, a thought you never imagined yourself having before but feels very right now that it’s in your head.

You sit down on your bed, the beginnings of an anxiety attack starting to crawl up your back.

Hah, what the fuck are you thinking? If you never went home Bro could just come up to Washington and find you, it’s not like your location is a secret or anything. And you probably couldn’t make it on
your own anyway, not without bumming on John’s couch or something pathetic like that. To be honest, you’d probably end up homeless. 3rd and Pike, here the fuck you come. Either that or you’d end up just going back home with your tail between your legs.

But would… would Bro even care? Would he actually care if he never saw or heard from you again, would he actually come looking for you?

You run your hands over your face, brain screaming ‘NO’ as an answer to all of those questions. Right, you should probably try to stop thinking about this, distract yourself.

The list of things that you could do becomes shorter and shorter as you consider each option—music, no, going for a walk, fuck no—so you end up just curling even tighter in on yourself, not moving from your bed.

A familiar feeling finds itself in the pit of your stomach and you realize that there’s only ever been one thing that could make this type of smothering anxiety go away. You’re not sure when the last time you did it was, and for a second you consider trying to stop yourself, but you figure what the hell, you’re already pretty fucked up physically right now. What’s a little more going to do?

Right. Okay. You start to untense just after making the decision, but a sick anticipation fills you up as you look for something to do it with. You rummage through your bag and find a sharp pair of tweezers. Those could work in a pinch, so you toss them onto your bed and keep looking. You’re pretty sure you still have that safety pin somewhere—ah, there it is.

You sit down on the bed and unhook the needle, staring numbly at it for a few minutes before pushing the hem of your boxers up to give you access to the upper part of your thigh. Faded red lines mark your skin and you trace them with the tip of your finger—how many months have they spent healing, only to be undone by what you’re about to do?

Every muscle in your body is still too tight, your head too heavy and full of cotton, your heart feeling too sick and beating too fast, and the only emotion you can really get a hold of is desperation, for some kind of relief. Anything.

You hold your breath and make the first cut, nothing more than a scratch, really. Blood forms little dots along the needle’s path, and it feels good to see it, somehow, it always does, but it’s not enough. In one quick motion you drag the pin across your skin as hard as you can.

This time when the blood spills out, it doesn’t feel good. You make another cut and still, nothing. Instead of the light, relieved feeling cutting usually gives you something wrong and twisted sets in. Blood oozes out onto your thigh and you set the needle down on your bed before dragging your index finger along the cut, smearing dark red onto your skin. Seeing the blood doesn’t feel good anymore. You try to process the fact that the only way you know how to quell your anxiety isn’t working, and panic sets in.

Your eyes dart around rapidly, no matter how hard you try to can’t get them to focus on anything. Your breathing gets heavy and shallow. You squeeze your blanket, the soft material gathering under your white knuckles. Your stomach gets tight, impossibly tight, and you make a sound that might’ve been a groan, but mostly you just sound scared.

There’s that feeling, again. You slam your fist against your shoulder, pulling back and clenching your fingers painfully. Something’s gotta give, you think, something’s about to break. A scream bubbles up in your throat but you don’t let it out. Nothing’s giving, nothing’s breaking. Your jaw clenches tighter.
A wave of nausea hits you as you lift up your hands in front of your face, as if by looking at them hard enough you could snap out of whatever the hell this is. Still unable to focus, your eyes show doubles of your trembling hands, and something about how the light hits them, how one seems to be just a slightly different color, makes them seem so alien.

You try to take a deep breath but it comes in too fast and sharp. You run your hands over your face, making a sound that might’ve been a sob. There’s the nagging, repeated thought of ‘if I could just’ as your fingernails dance over the bloody scratches on your thigh.

If you could just…

There’s a knock at the door.

==> Be Karkat.

There’s a lot of words you have at the ready, just waiting to pour out of your impulsive mouth, but when Dave opens the door and you take one look at his face all of that flies right out the goddamn window.

Because all you can see is his left eye, swollen almost shut, colored a deep and sickly purple and spotted with broken blood vessels.

“Whoa,” is all you say, more of a gasp than a word. Really fucking smooth.

“Sup?” he says, voice somehow more flat than usual. He isn’t wearing his shades and when you meet his eye, the one that isn’t fucking black, it just looks empty, like he’s not actually looking at you. Something is really, really wrong here.

“What happened to your eye?” you ask, stepping into the room and shutting the door behind you.

He doesn’t say anything.

“Dave?”

“Sorry, what?” he asks, voice far away, distant.

You take in a shuddering breath, trying to think through this, trying to figure out what to do.

You don’t want to aggravate the situation, you know that much. Looking him over, he seems like he’s dissociating something awful, probably way too out of it to even form a proper sentence. Not a scenario that you’re unfamiliar with, to be honest. You’ve had your brain just completely shut down on days where the dysphoria is bad, where the depression hits hard, but you and Dave are different people with different needs, and you don’t know what he needs right now.

“What happened to your eye?” you ask gently.

“Yeah I’m fine I’m just…” A lie, an obvious one at that. “I’m really, really, tired,” Dave says, sounding even more distant. “Just, suddenly, like, I’m so fucking tired.”

He sits down on his bed, feet planted on the ground and completely still. His shoulders move slowly with every shallow breath he takes. You wait an agonizingly long minute for him to say something else, but he’s back to just. Nothing.

“If you’re tired, lay down,” you say. You take a step forward, still feeling as if he’s not really looking at you.
He doesn’t respond. His bed is unmade, the sheets tangled up in the blanket. On the edge of the mattress is a pair of tweezers and a safety pin, the needle unhooked from the top.

On his upper thigh you can just barely make out little drops of blood seeping through his boxers.

“Come over to my room, then,” you say. He lets you pull him up from the bed and follows you when you leave his room. You look down the hall and don’t see anyone, so you lead the way, both of you in your bare feet.

You close the door behind you and sit him down on your bed. “Okay, what’s going on?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know, I just…” he pauses, stays silent for a beat too long. “I don’t know.”

“What happened to your eye?” you ask again, and watch as he reaches up to touch his face, thin fingers grazing the swollen purple spots on his skin.

“I don’t know.”

“Who did this to you?”

Something changes in his face and for a moment he looks scared. Terrified? He looks up at you.

“My…” he starts. He looks down again. “My brother did, he--” Dave shakes his head. “We were just… Fuck.” He buries his face in his hands.

Very carefully, you sit down next to him.

“I’m sorry I can’t fucking… talk right now. It was my fault.”

“What was?” you ask, raising a brow in confusion.

“The-- he hit me because I…” his words come out muffled against his fingers. “Couldn’t stop him.”

You sit in stunned silence.

“Fuck, that sounds really bad.”

“It is really bad!” you say, trying not to yell but failing miserably. “Like hell it’s your fault, if someone hits you that’s on them.”

“No…” Dave murmurs. “He wasn’t just like hitting me he was--” he stops short, like he’s thinking over his words. “We were like, sparring.”

You relax just a tiny bit, but then you see the blood on his leg again. Something’s not right. “It it was ‘just sparring’ then why are you so messed up right now?”

He stands up so suddenly it makes you jump. “Look, I fucking know, okay! I know it looks bad and it sounds bad, but don’t fucking--” he runs a hand through his hair and grits his teeth.

“Don’t what?”

He breathes in sharply. “I don’t know, I don’t fucking know what I was going to say or what’s going on, or why I’m acting like this, or-- fuck.” He sits back down next to you, and the next words come out slow and steady. “I don’t want to talk about this. Or think about this.”

“Okay,” you breath, and you think you see his shoulders relax.
“I don’t want to think about him.”

“Okay,” you repeat yourself, then stand up to give him the whole bed. “Lay down, Dave.”

He looks up at you, unsure, then slowly lies on his side, curling up in your blanket. You hear him let out a soft sigh.

“I’m sorry,” he says into the pillow, then says it again. “I’m sorry.”

You think about reaching out to touch his face, to brush away stray hairs, to touch him, to ground him, to let him know it’s okay. You think better of it.

“Go to sleep,” you tell him.

You’re pretty sure he’s already way ahead of you.
In which I continue to impose my music taste onto my favorite characters.

|||
“God, yes.”

He hands you a bottle of pills that rattle loudly when you take them from him, and you go to untwist the cap off but stop short when you notice the label.

“This is… uh…” Words escape you as you stare down at the words ‘menstrual relief,’ fairly certain that they’re staring right back at you.

“Yeah, it’s Midol, you can take it, it’s fine.”

“Uh, no it’s not?” you say, and the look of amusement he gives you only amplifies the horror building up in your gut.

“It’s fucking acetaminophen and caffeine,” he takes the bottle back and opens it for you, pouring out two tablets before shutting it again. “And a diuretic, so you might have to pee.”

You tentatively take the medicine from him, watching as he gets you a bottle of water from the mini fridge by his desk as well.

“You’re not fucking with me?”

“No!” he says, but the way he bites his lip, as if to hold back a laugh, has you raising a brow in suspicion.

The pain in your head throbs again, though, so you decide to just go for it, swallowing both pills and gulping down almost half the water bottle, because you just realized that you’re actually really thirsty.

“If I fucking die--”

“Oh my god!!” he says, laughing. “I’m not trying to kill you, Jesus Christ.”

“Then why are you laughing?”

“I just think it’s funny how freaked out cis guys get by period stuff,” he says, placing the pill bottle in his desk drawer. “You guys are pretty pathetic, you know that?”

You snort, because yeah, you were probably being a little bit dramatic about the whole thing.

“Thanks,” you say. “Uh, for the medicine. And for earlier.”

“Oh, no problem,” he says, a little taken aback, you think, because he probably thought you were just being sarcastic for a moment there.

“So, uh, what should we do? Like until John and the others get back or whatever.”

He lets out a sigh, then runs his hands down his thighs, thinking. “Are you hungry? We could go grab something to eat at one of the shitty places right off campus, treat ourselves to something outside the cafeteria?”

You take a second to think about it. “Dude, I’m fuckin’ starving.”

“Alright, food it is, then,” he says, cracking a small grin.

As he stands up from his desk chair and you from the bed, you awkwardly ask what you should do with the water he gave you, mostly with gestures, and he pops open the fridge and offers to put it
back in.

You realize way too late that you didn’t put the cap back on the bottle of water, and Karkat yells your name in surprise as you dump about half of the content onto his chest.

“Shit, sorry.” You reach out, not really sure what you could do to help. He swats your hand away.

“I’m fucking soaked, asshole!” He peels his sweater off, staring down at the wet spot with a nasty glare. “It didn’t go all the way through though, lucky for you, because if I had to take off a wet binder I’d fucking shove my foot down your throat.”

“Noted,” you say, mind still searching for some kind of solution.

He tosses the wet garment in the direction of a laundry hamper. “That was my last clean sweater by the way, fucking thanks for that.”

“Wanna borrow one of mine, then?” you suggest, words spilling out all messily. “So you don’t freeze out there?”

To your surprise, Karkat seems to blush at the suggestion.

“Oh, okay?” he folds his arms self consciously across his chest.

You make your way back to your dorm, Karkat slipping into a pair of black Vans and following behind you.

You open up the top drawer of your barely organized dresser and fish out a red pullover hoodie, along with a pair of skinny jeans you quickly pull on over your boxers. You try to put on your shades, but the lens sits way too painfully on your face, almost as if they were specifically designed with your black eye in mind. Reluctantly, you leave them behind.

“Thanks,” he mumbles as you hand the hoodie to him. He struggles a bit with fitting his arms through the too-long sleeves and pulling it over his head. He looks you over as you step outside your room, shutting the door and pulling on your tennis shoes. “What about you?”

You’re only wearing a baseball tee, the one with the red sleeves and the pixelized record on the front. It’s not especially warm or weather appropriate.

“I uh, I don’t really have…”

He cocks his head at you.

“I tried to ask my bro for a coat when I went back home,” you say, suddenly feeling like you’ve had the wind knocked out of you. Nonetheless your words come out, steady enough to not betray anything.

He moves to pull off the hoodie. “Then take this back!”

You stop him, placing both your hands on his shoulders. “No, dude, you’re wearing it, I’m the one who spilled water all over you like a dipshit.”

“No! If you don’t have anything else to wear then I’m not going to let you go out like that!”

“Dude, whatever, don’t worry about it. I’ll just buy a cheap coat or something, later.”

“Okay,” he huffs. “Then we’re fucking buying you one while we’re out.”
You protest all the way as you leave the residence hall, but Karkat insists on taking a bus to the shopping area outside of campus to find you something to wear now that it’s getting colder. He tells you that you’ll freeze your ass off because it’s fucking November and December is fast on its way. Just as you’re about to offer a snappy retort, a chilly wind hits you and makes your ears sting.

Yeah, okay, you do need to go shopping for winter clothes, but the idea of it has you thinking about what happened with your bro, and by the time the bus shows up at the campus bus stop you start to feel that spacey, far away feeling you had earlier. Small drops of rain fall from the sky and leave icy spots on your shoulders.

When you sit down next to Karkat on the bus your jeans rub painfully against the cuts on your thigh, and all of a sudden, it’s too much.

“Hey, uh, I change my mind,” you say, without an ounce of thinking beforehand, just as the bus starts moving.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, a bit too loud in the mostly empty bus.

Not that the bus isn’t loud, anyways. Everything is loud, actually, so much so that you sort of feel it in your jaw, vibrating in your bones in a very unpleasant way. You hear a car honk and a flock of birds scatter, and it makes you jump. Weirdly enough, you feel like you’ve heard that exact same series of sounds before, one summer day way back, right before Bro caught you off guard in the living room and hit the back of your left shoulder.

“Can I like, go back?” anxiety swells up inside you so fast your face feels numb, but you quickly add, “Wait, no, never mind, it’s fine.”

He gives you the most puzzled look. “What? Fuck no, you don’t seem fine at all. We can get off at the next stop and walk back.”

“No,” you blurt out. “I, uh, I’m fine, I just kinda can’t feel my face because I got anxious all of a sudden.” Your fingers twitch, balling up and letting go every second as he stares at you.

The bus slows to a stop and he moves to get up, but you pull on his sleeve and he sits back down. He eyes you as the bus starts moving again.

“It’s just that, like, there’s all this shit that I don’t want to think about but I keep getting reminded of, and some of it kind of happened fucking yesterday.” Without your shades you feel painfully naked and you kind of wish you had just sucked it up and worn them anyway.

He doesn’t say anything, instead opening his mouth to speak and then shutting it again, hesitating.

“Come on, man, give me a distraction. Fucking anything.” You let out a shaky breath and reach up to twist one of your hands in your hair. You’re always doing that when you’re anxious, moving your hands constantly. Twisting at fabric, tightening around themselves, sometimes you’ll wave them as if trying to shake the anxiety out, but you kind of look like you’re making a piss-poor attempt at being a bird when you do that.

Karkat pulls out a pair of headphones from his pocket, furrowing his brow in frustration at the mess of wires and taking a second to untangle them before plugging them into his phone. “Here.”

You stick the earbuds in your ears, checking carefully with trembling hands to see which one is left and right. He flicks to a music player on his phone and you watch as he scrolls through a list of songs.
“Here, I don’t know if you’ll like this but I listen to this stuff when I’m anxious,” he says as he presses play, and the sound of an acoustic guitar’s strings being plucked and strummed fills your ears.

You look out the window at the passing city as a man starts singing, appropriately, about rain.

Behind the sound of the music you can still hear the bus and the cars cutting through water on the road outside, but it’s easier to deal with. Lyrics you’ve never heard before, sung gently by a man whose name you don’t know, yeah, it’s working as a distraction so far.

Karkat sits silently next to you, he’s letting you hold his phone in your hand, still like stone, a lifeline in a rectangular piece of metal.

It’s not your type of music, like at all, but there’s a very tender feeling in your chest as you continue to listen, even just from the gesture. You think to open your mouth to let apologies and thankfulness spill out, because it’s hard to understand why someone would be nice enough to let you listen to their music to calm down, but you decide against it. Because that’d probably come across as a little neurotic.

Another song starts up, this time with drums and piano, but the same singer. You close your eyes and let the music fill your head, pushing out everything else.

It’s so good to learn
that right outside your window
There’s only friendly fields
and open roads
And you’ll sleep better when you think
you’ve stepped back from the brink
And found some peace inside yourself;
lay down your heavy load

It gets alright
to dream at night
Believe in solid skies
and slate blue earth below
But when you see him, you’ll know

Okay, fuck, maybe this is way too relatable for you right now, because some kind of emotion washes over you as the song plays, something raw twisting in your gut at simply just hearing those pronouns, because that’s Bro, definitely.

It's okay to find
the faith to saunter forward
There’s no fear of shadows
spreading where you stand
And you’ll breathe easier just knowing
that the worst is all behind you
And the waves that tossed the raft
all night have set you on dry land

You let the words fill your head, trying them out, the idea of them. The idea of breathing easier, getting better, feeling better, all of that. It’s hard to consider when you didn’t even realize that you needed it until yesterday, still don’t even really believe that you need it. Healing, that is. Some kind of recovery.
The next **song** that plays is a low-fi recording of this very gentle acoustic guitar playing man singing ‘hail Satan’ in an incredibly matter-of-fact tone.

“What am I listening to?” you ask, letting out a small laugh.

He looks embarrassed for a second, seeming to hesitate before saying, “Uh, The Mountain Goats?”

“It’s nice,” you say, and he looks a little less anxious. The song ends and you take out the earbuds and give him back his phone, mouthing a small ‘thanks’ as you do.

“Yeah, they’re okay. I mean, some of the songs are low quality and kind of fucking weird.” He pauses. “They’re my favorite band.”

“Huh,” you say.

“What?”

“I don’t know, I guess I never thought about what kind of music you’d like.” He gives you a questioning look. “Like, I didn’t ping you as being an indie kind of guy.”

“I’ll have you know that I listen to a wide variety of music, Dave, and am not, in fact, ‘an indie kind of guy.’”

“See, that’s fuckin’ weird, because I only exclusively listen to Snoop Dogg.”

He laughs, and you realize that you’re really, really close to him on this bus, because you can see his smile as it happens, the crinkle in his eyes, all of this so intimately, and it’s like you’ve never actually seen someone laugh before in your life.

The bus comes to a stop and Karkat gets up from his seat, so you follow him. Looking out the windows as you move down the aisle you can see a number of shops lining the street. You give the bus driver a quiet “thank you” before stepping off, the loud engine rumbling behind you as it drives away.

“Okay, there should be a Goodwill right around the corner, let’s start there,” Karkat says. You’re not complaining about him taking the lead, because you’re still floating around up in your head by this point and you’re not sure when things are going to start feeling real again.

Besides, you’re pretty sure he’s had way more experience exploring cities than you have, also your brain isn’t registering that he’s talking about the thrift store and not just the general concept of goodwill existing around the corner, somehow.

You walk in after him past a pair of automatic doors and into a huge space lit by florescent light, smelling oddly of dust and laundry soap. There are racks and racks of clothing in front of you, so much that it’s a bit overwhelming, but Karkat leads the way to a section of men’s clothing, then to a rack full of coats.

Over the speakers is playing a soft 80’s synth and there’s the sound of Karkat going through each hanger, plastic and metal clinking with each dissatisfied flick. All along the walls are huge framed paintings and photos, some looking like a middle schooler’s art project, and you get your bearings. You’re near the left-hand corner, by the front windows, and the store is mostly empty. Behind you is a cluster of fake potted plants and children’s furniture, and in front of you is Karkat, short with fluffy black hair, wearing your red hoodie. Familiar. You take a deep breath.

“Alright, what the fuck are we doing again?”
Karkat looks over at you as you stand next to him in front of the rack, a hint of surprise on his face as your words come out regular again instead of all cloudy and confused.

“We’re getting you a coat,” he says pointedly, like he suspects you might’ve forgotten.

“Okay, yeah, but why are we--” you gesture at the coats hanging in front of you. “I’m pretty sure these are, like, all size extra fuckin’ small.”

His hands stop short in their movements.

“I mean, I know I’m kind of a really fucking skinny dude, like, the kind of skinny where people are probably telling me to eat hamburgers behind my back, or whatever. But I have these long arms, and I’m pretty sure--”

“I…” he says, then hangs his head. “I always have to start here because the other clothes are too big for me.”

“Are you operating on some plane of reality where we wear the same size or did you straight up just forget that clothes go past the little ‘S’ sign up there?”

“Shut up.”

“I know you’ve never been, but I can personally tell you that there’s a whole new world out there,” you say, moving down the line with a smirk.

“A whole new world that’s pointless for me to visit because I’d be fucking swimming in everything like a microbe in the Atlantic fucking Ocean,” he pushes aside the last of the small coats and moves to join you.

“Dude, over-sized shit can totally be a look. You look fine in my hoodie,” you pull out a coat made entirely of faux fur. “You’d look like a cute little furball in this.”

He scoffs, and you become painfully aware of how much you just said about how he looks. You swear you saw him blush a little bit, probably signalling that you should just shut the fuck up, but when have you ever been able to do that?

He chews on his lip as he goes through each and every coat on the rack and you find it really hard to concentrate on the task at hand.

“You know, I didn’t mean to like, make fun of you or--”

“What about this one?” He pulls out a dark green windbreaker. You shake your head.

“I mean, saying you’d look cute was probably weird and patronizing but like… I didn’t mean it as an insult or anything? Because you do, um, you do look cute in my hoodie and not like, a bite-sized little kid or anything, and fuck, I just said you were cute again--”

“What?” he says, eyeing you as he pushes aside a horrendous floral print vest. “Dave, I can’t understand you when you mumble shit under your breath like that.”

“Nothing,” you say quickly, while the opportunity to save face still presents itself.

After being convinced to not buy a denim jacket embellished with a sequin lioness, simply for the prosperity of owning such a thing, you settle for a charcoal colored coat with a flannel lining, which fits you well and is actually really comfortable.
“Okay, boring stuff done,” you say, folding the jacket over your arm. “Now what do we do?”

“Well” Karkat says, “I like to go through their books sometimes, most of it is shit but every once in awhile there’s something good. Unless you wanna go?”

You think about heading back to your dorm and having to feed John and the others some bullshit story to explain your eye. “I don’t have anywhere I need to be,” you say with a shrug.

Karkat goes over to shelves full of old books, mostly paperback self-help books, and you wander after him, shoving your free hand in your jean pocket. He crouches down to reach the bottom shelf of a section labeled ‘romance’ and you realize that this is going to be a while.

Adjacent to the books are crates full of vinyl records, and you flick through them absently. The feel of records in your hands, the sound of them playing on a turntable, it was nice in a hard to explain sort of way. You like looking at the tiny grooves and wondering how they got all that music on there, tracing them with a finger and being reminded of your own fingerprints.

Karkat comes up to you about ten minutes later, nothing to show for his search, and watches for a second as you flick a pile of records forward, one by one.

“Do you have a record player?” he asks, looking over the crates.

“Nah,” you say, pushing the records all back to sit like they were before. “Not here, at least. I have-- had --a turntable back home, but I mostly used it to mix music.”

“You make music?”

“Yeah? Um,” your face feels hot, so of course you go ahead and say something stupid. “My tracks are hella fire, bro, they’ll knock your fuckin’ socks off.”

“Yeah, I’m fucking sure they will,” he laughs. “If I ever feel like subjecting myself to your garbage.”

You follow him over to shelves full of old knick-knacks and kitchenware, past teacups and coffee mugs and decorative plates. You take out your phone and snap a picture of a hideous little family of ceramic cats.

“What are you doing?”

“I wouldn’t be a good brother if I didn’t send Rose grainy pictures of these deformed little things with no context whatsoever.”

He laughs as you zoom in on the worst one’s face, seemingly painted on by someone who had never actually seen a cat before in their life. “Oh, that reminds me…”

“What?” you say as you open up Pesterchum on your phone.

“Rose was visiting my friend when I went back to Maryland.”

You turn to him, raising your brows. “No shit.”

“Yeah, I’m guessing they’re dating. You can imagine my surprise when I saw her in my home town, of all fucking places.”

“Wait, Rose has a girlfriend?”

He narrows his eyes at you. “I didn’t say my friend was a girl.”
“Dude, come on,” you say, laughing a little. “You think I don’t know that my sister is basically modern day Sappho, complete with the gay poetry? I mean, she’s tried to drag me to enough of those LGBT meetings she goes to.”

“And did you, uh, go?” he asks, fiddling with the lid to a ceramic jar.

“No, I, uh… I… I’m straight?” you say, and it comes out like a question. Something flashes across his face that you can’t quite place, so you decide to change the subject. “You wanna finish up here so we can go get something to eat?”

“Yeah,” he nods, following you to the register. You awkwardly wait in line behind a man buying a cart full of golf clubs and pleated trousers, paying quickly and not making eye contact with the cashier when it’s your turn.

== Be Karkat.

Dave has been sleeping in your bed for about twenty minutes now, and you are royally freaking the fuck out.

There’s still a sinking, sickly feeling in your gut left over from when you first found him, spaced the fuck out, eye swelled shut, skin sliced open by his own hands. For now all you can really do is let him rest, but what about when he wakes up? Should you try to patch him up? Would he let you? Would he want you to?

You started the day ready to give him an earful and lambaste him to the nth dimension for ignoring you these last few weeks but all you care about is how he feels right now, and it’s really kind of overwhelming, this fucking 180 your emotions are doing. You don’t really know how to feel. About how you feel. Because how you feel is, uh…

You look over at him, sleeping soundly with his face smushed into your pillow. His hair falls messily over his eyes and he breathes slow and steady breaths, your heart skipping a beat every moment it seems to take too long for his chest to rise again.

You watch him for a minute longer, then it hits you like a brick to the face.

The reason you got so upset over him not talking to you as much, why it hurt when he didn’t pester you or joke around at breakfast with you and John, why you wanted so badly for him to just say what the fuck you did so you could fix things, and it could go back to normal.

Because, and this is where you internally call yourself pathetic in about forty different and exponentially colorful ways, you fucking like him.

Like like him.

Like, you want him to be your fucking boyfriend.

You place your forehead against the surface of your desk with all the grace of… something really ungraceful, you guess, squeezing your eyes shut and letting out a small, strangled sigh.

No no no, maybe you don’t want him to be your boyfriend. Maybe you just care about him a lot and think he’s attractive, hell, a lot of people probably do, right? John and Jade and Rose, with the former two being perfectly viable romantic partners for him, and oh, fuck, okay, thinking about that is making you viscerally jealous now.

You wonder if realizing you have feelings for someone is supposed to make you want to rip your
own heart out and crush it into the dirt with your heel.

Deciding the best course of action is to scream about your feelings, you open up Pesterchum to see if anyone’s online.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering grimAuxiliatrix [GA] at 12:43 --

CG: HI, IF YOU’RE NOT TOO BUSY CAN YOU PLEASE COME KILL ME.
GA: Oh
GA: To What Do I Owe This Ominous Greeting
CG: YOU WERE RIGHT.
GA: About What
GA: Also Are You Okay What Is Going On
CG: I DO FUCKING LIKE HIM.
CG: DAVE, THAT IS.
CG: GOD, I HATE MYSELF JUST TYPING THIS OUT. WHY AM I EVEN TELLING YOU THIS??
CG: HAHA, WHO AM I KIDDING!
CG: HAVE I EVER HAD AN EMOTION THAT I DIDN’T IMMEDIATELY PUBLICALLY EXPEL AT WHOEVER WAS IN MY VICINITY, VIRTUALLY OR NO.
CG: NOT THAT IT WASN’T OBVIOUS, THOUGH, I MEAN YOU FIGURED IT OUT. I’M SURE HE AND EVERYONE ELSE ON THE FUCKING PLANET ALREADY KNEW BEFORE I DID.
CG: THIS IS JUST GREAT!
GA: I Think Maybe Youre Jumping The Proverbial Gun On This
GA: Yes It Was A Bit Obvious To Me But Only Because Im Fairly Attuned To How My Longtime Friends Act When They Have Crushes
GA: Because Ive Had To Deal With This Shit Since Like Elementary School
GA: And To Be Honest I Was Just Teasing You Back Then
CG: FUCK
CG: I
CG: YEAH, I GUESS I’M KIND OF OVERREACTING.
CG: BUT GODDAMN IT I THINK I SORT OF HAVE REASON TO!!
GA: It Sounds Like These Are Newly Formed Or At Least Newly Realized Feelings
GA: Did Something Happen
CG: UH
CG: HE’S KIND OF SLEEPING IN MY BED RIGHT NOW
GA: Okay What The Fuck
CG: I CAN EXPLAIN!!!
GA: Please Do
CG: I WENT OVER TO HIS ROOM BECAUSE I WAS ALL WORKED UP OVER SOMETHING STUPID, I FELT LIKE HE WAS IGNORING ME, BLAH BLAH BLAH
CG: BUT WHEN I GOT THERE HE HAD THIS HUGE BLACK EYE
CG: AND HE WAS ALL SPACED OUT AND JUST *REALLY* NOT OKAY, FROM WHAT I COULD TELL.
CG: AND IT WAS LIKE IT ACTIVATED SOMETHING IN ME I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW WAS THERE
CG: ALL I CARED ABOUT THEN WAS HELPING HIM HOWEVER I COULD
CG: AND ALL I WANTED WAS FOR HIM TO BE OKAY AND FOR WHOEVER HURT HIM TO FUCKING ROT
CG: BECAUSE WHATEVER THE DEAL WAS WE CAN HASH THAT OUT LATER
CG: I DON’T KNOW WHY I BROUGHT HIM INTO MY ROOM BUT HE FELL ASLEEP
AND NOW I’M FREAKING OUT
CG: BECAUSE I KEEP LOOKING OVER AT HIM AND GETTING THIS TIGHT FEELING
IN MY CHEST
CG: THERE’S JUST THIS TERRIBLE MIXTURE OF CONCERN AND FONDNESS AND
WHATEVER THE FEELING THAT YOU GET WHEN YOU LOOK AT SOMEONE YOU
WANT TO KISS IS CALLED
CG: ALL CRAMMED IN THERE IN MY CHEST CAVITY AS HAPHAZARDLY AS
POSSIBLE
CG: SO I ASK YOU AGAIN
CG: PLEASE
CG: IF YOU HAVE A SPARE MOMENT IN YOUR SCHEDULE
CG: TO JUST DROP EVERYTHING AND HOP ON THE NEXT PLANE TO SEATTLE
CG: AND JUST DO ME A REAL SOLID
CG: AND FCUKING
CG: KILL ME
GA: Oh My God This Is Adorable
GA: You Really Have It Bad As They Say
GA: Look At You Misspelling Words And Not Using A Drop Of Punctuation
CG: FUCK YOU.
GA: Also No Im Not Going To Kill You
GA: I Dont Have Any More Vacation Days
GA: And I Am Also Not Really Up For Murdering My Friends
CG: WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO NOW
CG: THIS IS GOING TO BE HORRIBLE, I CAN ALREADY TELL.
CG: YOU REMEMBER HOW AWFUL MY LAST CRUSH ENDED, RIGHT?
GA: I Remember It Being Messy And Unrequited
GA: However You And Terezi Are Still Friends So Thats Not So Bad
GA: Speaking From Experience
GA: I Mean Im Not Exactly Chummy With Vriska To Be Quite Honest
GA: Not That It Matters Much As Im Dating Rose Now
GA: Thank You By The Way
CG: YOU’RE WELCOME.

You hear Dave stir behind you, shifting on your bed and letting out a sleep laced sigh.

CG: GOD, I REALLY DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO ABOUT THIS ENTIRE SITUATION?
CG: NOT JUST THESE PIECE OF SHIT FEELINGS, BUT THE FACT THAT HE’S *IN MY
ROOM* RIGHT NOW.
CG: WHICH DIDN’T STOP BEING A THING BY THE WAY!!
GA: Well I Think It Would Be Rude To Wake Him
GA: So Theres Not Really Anything You Can Do While Hes Asleep
CG: OKAY, AND WHEN HE WAKES UP?
GA: Hmm
GA: Try Not To Embarrass Yourself
CG: HAHAHAHAHAHAHA
CG: NO OFFENSE, BUT DID YOU FORGET WHO YOU’RE TALKING TO?
CG: THERE’S A NINETY NINE PERCENT CHANCE THAT WHEN HE WAKES UP I
WILL IMMEDIATELY PROCEED TO HAVE VIOLENT EMOTIONAL DIARRHEA
BECAUSE THAT’S JUST THE KIND OF TERRIBLE, ILL-CONTROLLED PERSON I AM!!
GA: I Think Youre Doing That Thing Where Youre Inappropriately Hard On Yourself
GA: And Jumping To The Worst Possible Outcome
GA: Take Some Metaphorical Emotional Pepto Bismol And Try To Calm Down
CG: WHAT THE FUCK WOULD THAT EVEN BE?  
GA: I Don't Really Know Im Just Going Along With Your Gross Analogy  
GA: Anyways I Have To Go My Break Is Over  
GA: Good Luck With Your Frankly Adorable Crush  
CG: WAIT  
CG: YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TELL ANYONE ABOUT THIS, ARE YOU?  
GA: Well Im Sorely Tempted To Discuss It With Rose  
CG: OH GOD PLEASE NO  
GA: However I Will Keep Your Secret If Only Because I Kind Of Owe You  
CG: YOU BETTER KEEP YOUR FUCKING WORD, MARYAM.  
GA: Of Course


Dave doesn’t stir again until about an hour later, time you spend in equal parts on Wikihow trying to figure out what to do when you have a crush on your friend and deleting your search history. By the time he finally wakes up, you’ve given up and started on outlining your next English paper as a distraction, although you don’t get very far.

Dave sits up from the bed, all sleepy-eyed with messy hair. His eye is still bruised, maybe even a deeper shade of purple, now. He speaks with a raw, sleep-laden voice, low enough to make you slightly jealous in between how fucking charming it is, somehow. You offer him painkillers and realize that you only have Midol, then give it to him anyway, unable to resist fucking with him, just a little.

Anxiety bubbles in your chest when you ask if he wants to get something to eat (and he actually says yes, fuck) and again when you follow him to his dorm, worrying that maybe you went off on him a little too hard when he only spilled water on you.

You’re secretly kind of happy that Dave was so insistent on you borrowing his sweatshirt, although the guilt over him being cold in your stead definitely ranks pretty high on your list of emotions.

It’s kind of hard to think about, though, when his scent is all over you, when the softness of the fabric touches your skin, when the sleeves bunch up around your wrists exactly the way you like.

You see the tell-tale signs of an anxiety attack building up in him on the bus, so you offer him your music, realizing after he’s already put your headphones on and listened for a few minutes that he probably could have just listening to his **own** music on his **own** phone, but. Whatever.

You head into Goodwill, because neither of you are really the type to spend more than $40 on an article of clothing, and you’re not sure how much cash Dave has on him, but that wouldn’t be a problem if he wasn’t so damn insistent on paying for it himself.

Regardless, going to thrift stores always was a nice sort of experience. The wide open space, the clothing racks full of either the ugliest, oldest clothing or brand new fashionable pieces (or items somewhere in between). Sometimes you just like looking at everything without any intention to buy, especially the books. Some of your favorite books on your bookshelf back home were thifted. And then sometimes, like now, all that you can find are about thirty copies of the Twilight Saga and shelves full of medically inaccurate diet books.

The topic of Rose’s unambiguous gayness comes up, somehow, and being the absolutely smooth piece of shit you are, you ask if he did go with Rose to the LGBT club.

Because you are a terrible person, who kills any shot at anything ever before the earth can even make
one full rotation.

Not that you had a shot in the first place, because when you’re in that aisle full of cups and ceramics, fiddling with the lid to that jar, Dave just kind of casually says something that just kind of utterly fucking destroys you, from the inside.

“I’m straight.”

You want to die.

All things considered, you do a good job of not letting on that anything is wrong when you and Dave grab some food at a nearby pho place, or when Dave puts on his coat and asks you how it looks, all jokingly and faux-flirty, because it looks really fucking good, actually.

When you get back to your dorm you tell him you’ll see him later, enter your room, shut the door firmly behind you, and let your face crumple up as you start to cry.

The tears roll down your face as you kick off your shoes, then more when you remember that you’re still wearing his hoodie. You pull it off and throw it down onto the floor for good measure. You stick your face into your hands and let out a tiny sob.

It’s the end of the day, so you let yourself undress, unpeeling your binder and stripping down to your boxers and a plain tee, throwing your clothes all over the floor before flopping onto your bed. You hug your pillow close as sobs rack through your body, your already sore ribs throbbing with each shaky breath you try to quell. You’re pretty sure that if you were full-on crying that someone would hear you through the walls, but besides that, you like to think that at this age that you’re a little bit above all that.

(You’re not, you’re just making things worse by trying to hold back.)

You try not to think too much about how Dave admitted to having exclusive attraction to the gender that you rejected and subsequently transitioned from, because it just makes you feel worse. Instead you sort of let your mind blank out as you cry, the smothering feeling of rejection eventually bleeding out as you steady your breathing. Then, eventually, with that heavy feeling in your head and all over your body, you fall asleep.

…

When you wake up, very early in the next morning, sadness seems gives way to anger.

Not directed at Dave, though, well, maybe a little bit, because straight people as a concept just kind of piss you off in general. Rather, at the whole situation, the whole thing where as soon as you realize you liked someone, the world didn’t waste any time making sure you knew it was futile.

You take a minute while getting dressed to sit down on your bed and groan heavily into your hands. The sweater from yesterday is dry now, at least, so you can put off doing your laundry for the rest of the day. The weather app on your phone says it’s about forty degrees outside, so you layer a flannel under the sweater and pull on a pair of extra thick socks.

You hope Dave isn’t too cold today. Maybe you should’ve checked to make sure he had decent socks or even gloves to wear, and--

You stop that train of thought before it gets too far down the tracks. Why are you wasting so much time worrying about him when he had no problem slam-dunking your heart into the trash yesterday?
A heavy sigh escapes your lips. It’s not Dave’s fault, he has no idea how you feel about him, and as much as you would like to, you can’t hold his sexuality against him. And try as you might, you’re not going to stop caring about him anytime soon.

The most you can do, you decide, is to be a good friend.

You lie back onto your bed, covering your face with your hands.

Yeah, good luck with that.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

==> Be Karkat.

You’re sitting in the library, sharing a table in the corner with John and Jade, books open on the surface and papers everywhere. As if any of this is going to help you actually study.

It’s December now, which means that finals are right around the corner. You’re a little grateful for the extra schoolwork and studying, because at least it’s been keeping your mind off your pathetic crush. But that doesn’t mean that the stress isn’t kicking your ass; just last night you pulled enough of your hair to make a tiny bald spot near the base of your scalp, unnoticeable with how thick your hair is, but still.

Jade is scribbling down the rough draft to her final essay, which you promised you’d help edit for her if she helped you with your math homework. John is nose-deep in a biology textbook, but seems to keep getting distracted by his phone.

You sigh, a bit loudly in the library, dragging your hands down your face. There’s a few painful spots that have sprung up on your forehead from the stress and you wince as you accidentally press on them.

It’s your turn to be distracted by your phone, though, because you have a notification from Pesterchum.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 14:32 --

TG: yo

You take a minute to scream internally. And I do mean a minute; there’s at least a solid sixty seconds of uninterrupted screaming in your brain.

CG: HEY.

Wow, nice one. A single-word greeting ending with a period. You try again.

CG: WHAT’S UP?

Do people even say what’s up anymore? You seriously doubt it.

TG: nothing really just hanging the fuck out here on my lonesome while everyone else is apparently anywhere but in this dormitory
TG: seriously this place is a goddamn ghost town what gives
CG: EVERYONE’S PROBABLY, OH I DON’T KNOW, STUDYING FOR THE FUCKING FINALS THAT ARE HAPPENING AT THE END OF THE WEEK?
CG: JOHN AND I ASKED IF YOU WANTED TO STUDY WITH US AT THE LIBRARY AND YOU SAID ‘no thanks’ WHAT GIVES?

You realize that you just ended a sentence with “what gives” when he did the exact same thing two lines ago.
TG: idk im not really up to studying today
TG: also you dont necessarily have to do that in the library like ive been doing well on my tests and shit so far
TG: and i havent even set foot in that building once
CG: WELL, NOT EVERYONE MIRACULOUSLY GETS THROUGH COLLEGE WITHOUTEVER OPENING A TEXTBOOK.
CG: FUCK YOU, FOR THAT, BY THE WAY.
TG: i do open textbooks like once in a blue moon or whatever
TG: hell i even study for some of my classes granted theyre things im actually interested in and will be useful to know for my major
TG: anything else is just whatever like fuck it
TG: i dont need to know any spanish tbh so im going to put my short term memory to work for that exam when it comes and spend my brain energy points elsewhere
CG: RELYING ON YOUR SHORT TERM MEMORY SEEMS KIND OF DANGEROUS THOUGH, DOESN’T IT?
CG: LIKE, MEMORIZING EVERYTHING RIGHT BEFORE THE TEST INSTEAD OFACTUALLY LEARNING THE SHIT.
TG: well what about the opposite then
TG: stressing yourself the fuck out trying to retain all this shit theyve been throwing at you for months at the very end
TG: spending like a whole week just cramming all this info in there hoping it sticks
TG: im just saying man like its easier to prioritize one thing and half ass or even quarter ass everything else
CG: THAT’S EASY FOR YOU TO SAY.
CG: I’M NOT LIKE YOU, I CAN’T JUST *NOT* STUDY FOR SOMETHING, EVEN THE SUBJECTS I’M ACTUALLY INTERESTED IN AND KNOW A LOT ABOUT.
CG: ‘HALF-ASSING’ SOMETHING FOR ME IS STILL A DAY OR SO OF CRAMMING AND SEVERAL HOURS OF MENTAL FLAGELLATION AFTERWARDS.
TG: is that what youre doing now
TG: flagellating yourself
CG: PRETTY MUCH!!
TG: lmao so is that what youre into
CG: WH
CG: A KL;H

You reel back a little bit, heat rising to your face as you struggle finding the words to respond to that.

TG: omfg im kidding
TG: anyways so how long do you think you and everyones going to be cramming today im getting lonely over here
CG: OH, WE’LL PROBABLY BE DONE AT ABOUT HALF-PAST GO FUCK YOURSELF.
CG: ARE YOU SERIOUSLY JUST HANGING OUT IN YOUR ROOM RIGHT NOW? NOT EVEN STUDYING AT ALL? JUST ‘CHILLING’??
TG: what no
TG: dude ive been ass deep in essays all goddamn day
TG: fuckin laptop keyboard has been taking a beating and im pretty sure the fan in this thing is begging for the sweet release of death
TG: the english one especially i think not ever taking any notes is coming to bite me is the ass for once
CG: THAT’S JUST RICH, COMING FROM THE GUY WHO MADE FUN OF ME FOR MY ‘OBSESSIVE’ NOTE TAKING ALL SEMESTER.
TG: okay come on the color coded pens and highlighters and shit was a bit much wasnt it
TG: in the end is all that stuff actually helping or no
CG: IT IS HELPING, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
CG: IF YOUR NOTES ARE ALL JUST ONE COLOR AND NOT SECTIONED OFF ANYWHERE, IT’S EASY TO GET LOST IN ALL THE BULLSHIT YOU WROTE.
CG: AT LEAST IT IS FOR ME, AND THE HIGHLIGHTING LETS ME KNOW WHAT WAS IMPORTANT DURING THE LECTURE WHEN I GO TO STUDY THEM LATER.
TG: damn dude youve really got this down to a science dont you
TG: ngl its impressive
TG: nerdy and obsessive
TG: but yeah youre obviously a dedicated student which is an admirable thing tbh
TG: coming from the obnoxious autodidact who would rather face plant into a pile of his own shit than spend any meaningful amount of time doing what most consider a ‘study sesh’ at the local library
CG: OH
CG: UH, THANKS I GUESS.
CG: AND HEY, DON’T DISCOUNT YOURSELF SO FAST.
CG: BEING SELF TAUGHT IS REALLY GODDAMN IMPRESSIVE IN OF ITSELF, EVEN IF YOU DO PISSED OFF THE PROFESSORS FROM TIME TO TIME.
TG: lmfao dude did i tell you how much my anthropology teacher hates me
CG: YES, I’VE HEARD.
CG: SO, UM. DID YOU WANNA BORROW MY NOTES?
TG: what
CG: YOU SAID YOU WERE HAVING TROUBLE WITH THE ESSAY?
CG: I DON’T MIND GIVING THEM TO YOU, I’M ALREADY PRETTY SQUARED AWAY WITH THE FINAL FOR THAT CLASS. IT’S JUST ALL THE OTHER SHIT THAT’S BEEN KEEPING ME UP TO TWO EVERY GODDAMN NIGHT AND TURNING MY FOREHEAD INTO THE TRANS-MEXICAN VOLCANIC BELT.
CG: PUN INTENDED.
TG: okay cool i guess having them wont hurt
TG: just let me know when youre back from the library ill come get them or whatever
CG: OKAY, LATER THEN.
CG: FOR NOW I’M GONNA GO BACK TO SLAMMING MY SKULL REPEATEDLY AGAINST THIS OVERPRICED TEXTBOOK AND HOPING SOMETHING COMES OUT OF THAT.
TG: nice

After another twenty minutes spent trying to study, you, John, and Jade decide to go grab something to eat. Which means, of course, heading to the cafeteria and buying a can of doubleshot espresso at the indoors Starbucks and scarfing down a shitty turkey sandwich.

“I’m so glad to get out of there,” Jade says, sitting down with you and John at a table with an apple and a cup of hot coffee in hand. “I mean, I like studying sometimes, but it’s just been nonstop for like two weeks.”

“I found a grey hair this morning before I got in the shower,” John says, taking a bite of yogurt. “That’s gotta be some kinda milestone, right?”

You’re about to ask Jade where Rose has been, since you haven’t seen her much these past few days, when out of nowhere she walks up to the table the three of you are sitting at.

“I have given up,” she says as she sits down. She’s wearing a huge lavender pullover and black
climbing up the stairs, her hair barely brushed and usual face of makeup missing.

“Oh my god, Rose,” Jade says, laughing a little. “You said the same thing last night, right before
drinking two Rockstars and staying up all night to do your homework.”

“Did you really?” John asks. Rose looks at him as she drinks what is probably black coffee out of a
large thermos.

“I did some calculations…” she starts.

“No,” you interrupt her. “I know where this is going.”

“I did some calculations,” she repeats, “and to pass my classes this semester, I don’t actually have to
take all of the finals.”

“Rose…” John starts to say. Jade gives her a concerned look.

“No, listen. I can get a zero on my lit essay and still have a B in that class. But I have to get a 90 on
my calc exam. So I’m prioritizing.”

“You cannot be serious,” you say. Just the thought of what she’s talking about doing is enough to
make anxiety swell up in your chest.

She takes another drink. “I absolutely am.”

You’re too angry to finish eating, because nothing you nor Jade and John say makes Rose budge
from her position. She wishes you well as you head back to the library and says she’s off to take a
nap.

The table you had claimed earlier is taken when you get back, so you end up in a corner sitting on
those weird little round stools that are always in libraries, trading notes and going over flash cards.
You learn soon enough that the extensive notes you thought Jade had taken during her math classes
are both too advanced for what you’re learning and also mostly just little doodles of Squiddles and
randomly highlighted words. She helps you through some of the stuff you’re still trying to grasp,
though, mostly from memory because she’s kind of a genius, lucky you and your choice in friends.

By the time you’re heading back to your room, you’ve all but forgotten about your conversation with
Dave earlier. So it takes you by surprise when you hear a knock at your door, just as you’re
attempting to wiggle out of your binder.

It’s a minute or so before you get yourself decent again, in the span of which Dave must’ve decided
that you didn’t hear him, so he knocks again.

“Sorry, I was changing,” you say as you open the door, and there he is.

There he is.

Dave’s bruised eye had healed after about a week, swelled purple skin giving way to splotchy marks
easily hidden under shades, then to nothing. Like it never happened. He told he others he hit his face
on the corner of the bathroom sink when he got sick over break, and you backed him up on that. For
whatever reason, Dave didn’t want it getting out that he was apparently raised by a violent, abusive
asshole, and you can respect that, of course. But lying to his friends felt weird, especially being the
only one in the group who knew the truth.

Dave laughs, the sweet sound of it piercing you somewhere in your chest cavity. “Did you forget
about earlier? Sorry for bothering you man, but this essay’s kicking my ass. I tried to start it and
realized I had no idea what I was doin’, so now I’m way behind and like five hundred words in the
hole.”

You try not to think too much about how Dave is apparently only just now starting the final lit essay,
three days before it’s due, when you finished yours yesterday after spending two entire weeks on it.

“Here,” you pull out the notes from one of the folders piled high on your desk. “Sorry if the
handwriting’s bad.”

“No worries,” he says, and takes the sheets of paper from you, waving them in his hands as if to test
them, for something. “My handwriting is shit, too. Thanks, man.”

He waves as he leaves, and just like that he’s out of your room, door shut behind him and leaving
you alone for the rest of the night.

==> Be Dave.

You’re sitting in the dark on your bed, fingers typing away on autopilot at this point. You’re not sure
if what you’re writing is making a lot of sense, but you’ve always been pretty good at bullshitting
essays and getting A’s on them, so you think it’s probably fine.

John is sleeping on the other side of the room; he made you promise you’d wake him up around four.
It’s only just three, the hours of the night crawling by at a snail’s pace. You sigh and adjust your
headphones, hitting play on the full Plastic Beach album you found on Youtube for about the third
time since starting this particular essay.

Karkat’s notes are helping, you weren’t really sure if they would but they are. His handwriting is sort
of hard to read-- he does that thing where all the letters are capitalized and pretty small-- but he really
did go all out with the color coding during class.

At four in the morning, you wake up John like you said you would, pushing him in the shoulder until
he jolts out of sleep.

“Oh?” he says, reaching out clumsily to put on his glasses.

You sit on the floor with him for a little while, surrounded by books and loose notebook paper. John
is typing away at his laptop, furiously trying to get the last thousand words of one of his papers, and
you stare blankly ahead at your own essay.

“I can’t wait until this is all over with,” John says, sometime after you announced that it was four
twenty. “I can’t wait to go back home and spend Christmas with my dad.”

“Yeah,” you say, not really registering what is was that John said until after the fact.

“I bet you can’t wait to get the fuck out of rainy Seattle and go back home, right?”

“I’m--” you say. I’m not going back, ever, is what you want to say, but what comes out is: “Yeah,
onece finals are over I’m out of here and on the first plane back to Houston.”

Fuck, you have absolutely no plans to get on a plane and go anywhere, in fact the only thing you
want to do this holiday season is hide away in your dorm room for four weeks.

Whatever, just another thing you have to lie about because you can’t bring yourself to tell your
friends the truth about Bro, you guess.
To be honest, you feel incredibly sick whenever he comes up and you have to act like everything’s fine, whenever your friends joke about the black eye you had, whenever you have to come up with another lie. Talking about something at lunch, and Jade brings him up, texting Rose in class, and she says something that makes you think of him. It all piles up, and even though you’ve since renounced him as your bro he still manages to have an impact on your life.

It’s like he’s tainted everything in your life; like it’s impossible to get away from him.

Okay, maybe the fact that you’re on no sleep right now is making your internal narrative a little bit angsty, but sometimes you just have to sit on the floor at four in the morning and let yourself feel sad, because that emotion just doesn’t come to you a whole lot of the time.

You end up taking a power nap an hour before your first final, waking up to your alarm blaring an audio file you saved of the Fresh Prince of Bel Air opening, except all the verses play at once.

Right before going into the building where your English class is, you meet with Jade and Karkat at a concrete bench just outside.

“Who’s ready to fucking die?” you ask as you approach them.

“I don’t think it’s going to be that bad,” Jade says, hands wrapped around a paper cup full of coffee. “I’m still really nervous, though.”

Karkat takes a big drink out of his own cup, then tosses it in a trashcan nearby. “This is the one I’m most confident about, but I still feel like I’m going to fall flat on my fucking ass.”

You check the time on your phone. “We should probably head in now, everyone got their student ID’s? I think the professor said we’d need them.”

“Of course we fucking need them,” Karkat says. “That’s only been repeated about a hundred times every day for the last week and a half.”

Jade takes in a jittery breath and stands up from the bench. “Want the last of my coffee?” she asks you, and offers you her cup.

Oh, what the hell. You take a drink.

It’s disgusting.

Jade and Karkat are at least too busy laughing at you while heading inside to be anxious about the exam, which is nice, even if it’s at your expense. You’re a little bit nervous, too, but only because you really don’t like the idea of having to be stuck in the same room for two hours.

You sit down in the lecture hall and spend what seems like forever filling out little bubbles in your test sheet with a number two pencil, then manage to zip through writing the timed essay, mostly because your hand likes to move faster than your brain. You’re not really sure if you did your absolute best, but you finish the exam feeling like you’ll at least score an 85, so that’s good enough for you.

“I fucking failed,” Karkat says as soon as the three of you walk out of the building.

“Come on, Karkat, I’m sure you did fine,” Jade says. “Better than me, probably, I think I only just passed the essay portion.”

Karkat lets out a loud sigh. “Well, at least it’s fucking over with. When are your guys’ next ones? I
have math in three hours.”

“I only have an hour until my chem exam,” Jade says. “But I’m not really worried about that. What about you, Dave?”

You sigh, rubbing your eye a little bit under your shades. “I got anthropology in like twenty minutes. But after that my next one isn’t until, like, three.”

Jade takes both yours and Karkat’s hands in hers, bringing them together in the middle. Your hand touches his, and it’s warm. “Well, here’s to good luck and easy tests, for all of us.”

“Here’s to me drinking a seven shot espresso and getting into a knife fight with my shadow self in some rank ass back alley when this is all over,” Karkat says, and you and Jade burst out laughing.

Finals week goes by slower than you thought possible, but it does go by, somehow. You make it to the end, leaving your last exam and sending in your last essay at around eight pm on Friday, and you sleep until eleven the next morning.

You listen to friends and classmates talk about heading home for the break, keeping quiet all the while. You haven’t told anyone that you’re staying at school instead of heading home, nor do you plan to. If you mentioned it, it’d only lead to questions being asked, and you want to avoid explaining yourself and the situation as much as possible.

‘The situation.’ You scoff at yourself. It’s late in the afternoon now, and you sit on your bed while John gathers up his things, laptop open to anything but an academic article or the student portal. Part of you wants to just be open about it, to tell all your friends that you cut contact with your bro, and that he’s a terrible person, but another part of you forces you to keep your mouth shut. They wouldn’t believe you, you don’t think, not without you getting into some of the more gruesome details. And the truth is, you don’t even allow yourself to think about those most of the time, so forget spilling all your traumatic memories to another person.

“Don’t you have to pack dude?” John says, grabbing a few of his shirts and throwing them on the growing pile of clothes on his bed. His words startle you out of your thoughts.

“Yeah,” you choke out. “Yeah, I’m just-- I’ll get on that.”

You end up going through the motions of filling your duffel bag with clothes, of packing away your laptop and camera, all performative, all just to keep him from asking questions.

You feel nauseous the whole time.

Just as you’re cramming several pairs of socks into your backpack, as if you’re not just going to remove them again once John is gone, there’s a knock at the door.

John hops up and goes to get it, and on the other side of the door is none other than Karkat Vantas.

He’s wearing a coat over a heavy hoodie and jeans, his suitcase standing upright by his feet. “Hey, guys, I just wanted to say bye before going to the airport,” he says.

“Oh man, you’re leaving already?” John asks. “Hey, Dave, do you have to go soon, too?”

Karkat locks eyes with you, and you wonder if your panic is evident behind your shades.

“You’re going back to Texas?” he blurts out, foregoing any kind of caution that usually arises when that place comes up in conversation around the others.
“Yeah, man,” you say, voice as calm and flat as possible. “Wanna ride to the airport together?”

He’s indignant, for just a second, then seems to swallow what he wants to say. “Sure, if you’re ready to leave now.” He crosses his arms.

You both say bye to John, and he gives you both a quick, awkward hug, and tells you to have a merry Christmas. He waves you off with a goofy bucktoothed grin, and you shut the door to your room behind you.

“You wanna fucking explain yourself?” Karkat hisses at you as soon as you make it to the end of the hall. “Why the fuck are you going back there?”

You don’t answer right away, there being other people in the building that you don’t want listening in on your drama. You step out into the stairrail with him.

“Hey!” he says, grabbing your bag and stopping you in your tracks.

“Karkat, chill,” you try to say, but he won’t have any of it.

“Is he making you go back there?” he asks. “Is that what it is? Dave, you don’t have to, you don’t have to do anything that piece of shit--”

“I’m not going back to Texas,” you tell him firmly.

“What?” he says, anger quickly giving way to confusion.

“I’m just pretending to pack and go to the airport and shit so John doesn’t ask any questions,” you say, and watch as he deflates.

“Jesus fuck, Dave, you had me so fucking worried there for a second.” He lets out a heavy sigh and rubs his eyes.

You almost ask him why, why he would be worried or why he would care, especially so much. Seeing his usual anger bursting out, like a flame turning to a roaring fire, just at the thought of you ending up somewhere unsafe. It makes your chest feel all warm.

“What?” he says, furrowing his brows. “What are you smiling about?”

You blink a few times. “I was smiling?”

He just sighs and leads the way down the rest of the stairs.

==> Be Karkat.

You let Dave ride with you to the airport, to save face, so there’s no questions asked, just like he wants, but you spend the whole time fuming under the surface, for reasons you can’t quite pinpoint.

“You gonna just head right the fuck back to campus, then?” you ask him when you step off the bus at the airport.

“What? Oh, I uh,” he says, and you turn to face him before heading inside. “Thought I might see you off?”

“And then what? Spend the next four weeks in your dorm not talking to anyone?”

He fidgets with the strap of his bag. “Are you mad at me? Look, I know this whole ‘lying to the
others’ shit is getting old by now--”

“No! I’m not mad at you,” you say, but your tone seem to suggest otherwise. You try to dial it down. “I’m mad because… I don’t fucking know, okay? That you have to hide away because of some asshole in Houston? That you don’t have anywhere to go?”

He looks down at his feet. “Yeah, dude, I know. It’s… it’s fucked up. I know.”

The bus behind him starts up again and drives away, the loud and put-upon engine leaving behind the smell of gasoline.

The words spill out of your mouth. “Come with me.”

“What?” he says. He’s got his hands shoved in his pockets, shoulder weighed down by his bag, packed too heavy for a trip he has no intention of taking.

“Come with me,” you say again, heart beating too fast in your chest. “I might be able to get you a last minute ticket with my dad’s extra miles. If-- if I can, would you--”

“You want me to come to DC with you?” he looks at you curiously. “Why?”

You open your mouth and close it, words failing you. “Because… I--” you start to say. “I don’t think you should be alone. You should be… You can stay at my house, there’s room, it’s just me and my dad.”

He only looks at you, expression unreadable.

“Look, it’s not fucking fair for you to have to be alone, just because you can’t go home. You shouldn’t have to spend the holidays by yourself, and I’m just saying that, uh, you’re welcome to, um…”

His expression softens a bit.

“You’re welcome to spend them with me.”

It’s an eternity before he answers. “Okay.”

“Oh, okay?” you ask, heart leaping in your chest.

“Yeah, I guess, if you can get the ticket then I wouldn’t mind… I mean, it sounds nice. Staying over at your place, I dunno.” He scuffs one of his shoes against the pavement.

“Oh, okay,” you say, like a broken record. “Okay, let me see what I can do.”

It takes some doing, and a lot of stress talking to one of the ticket agents, while a family of six waits in line behind you, obviously very annoyed, but you miraculously get Dave a ticket. It’s not on the same flight as you, it’s actually one two hours later than your departure time, and you had to pay extra taxes and fees out of pocket. But you’ll fucking take it.

When it’s time for you to board, you say bye to Dave and tell him you’ll be waiting at airport for him, and he’s surprisingly trusting. Easygoing, even, as if he’s not about to fly to a part of a country he’s never been to before, two hours behind his companion. If it were you, you’d probably be too anxious to function. Not that you’re not almost at that point anyway, in the situation that you’ve managed to create. But you’ll save that panic attack for when you’re stuck at the Reagan airport for two hours, waiting on the guy you have a crush on so you can surprise your dad with a house guest
that he’s never met, who’s staying for the entirety of the winter holidays.

Jesus Christ, what the fuck are you doing.

Panic springs up about an hour into the plane ride, and you push your head firmly back against the seat as you try to come to terms with what you apparently just made happen. Which is, your impulsive ass invited Dave to come with you, and he actually agreed, and it’s too late to back out of it now.

Your stomach cramps up terribly the whole way to DC, only easing up when you’re distracted by getting off of the plane and retrieving your luggage. The airport is mostly empty, especially during the lull between landing flights. Most people get their stuff and go, maybe stopping by Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts first. You think about getting a coffee, but your anxiety is currently making you feel like shitting your entire stomach out, so you stick with water.

With nothing else to do, you claim a table with some chairs around it near where people file out of their gate and into the airport, the one you triple checked that Dave was landing at. Whenever people start to come down the hallway past the exit, with their luggage and tired faces, you peer at the very end to see if you see any sign of him. Even when you know that his flight isn’t landing for another hour, you get your hopes up every time.

At two fifty four in the morning, though, one hour and fifty minutes after you landed in DC, you look down the hallway, and it is Dave this time. He looks tired, but gives you a small smile, and you can’t help but smile widely in return as he approaches. You wish you could go to him without a security guard getting mad at you for going past an arbitrary line drawn on the floor.

But then he’s there, in front of you, having followed you all the way across the country.

So this is happening, you guess.

=> Be Dave.

After Karkat leaves to board his own plane to DC, you’re left in the Seattle airport with nothing to do for two hours.

Except wonder what the fuck it is you just agreed to.

You curl up in an uncomfortable chair while you wait and go over all the different ways you might be able to back out of this. There’s nothing stopping you from just heading back to campus, unpacking all your stuff, and sending Karkat a text telling him you changed your mind, but you can’t do that. Not after what it took to get your ticket, and not when Karkat was nice enough to ask you to come with him in the first place.

Eventually, after hours spent listening to music on your phone and pacing around in front of your flight’s gate, it’s time to board. And you hesitate.

You really don’t know what you’re getting into.

But when the line to board is gone, and they’re calling for the last of the passengers, your anxiety starts to give way to excitement, and with your boarding pass in tow, you walk down the air bridge and onto your flight.

The flight is around five hours, and you manage to nap for part of it. You sit by the aisle next to an elderly woman, who smiled at you and made small talk when you first sat down. Sitting in one place for so long gets you a little bit anxious, so you put on your good headphones that don’t leak out
sound and play your music as loud as you want.

Through the windows you can see lights as you land in DC, and what you think is water, a river maybe. Your ears are plugged up and you can’t wait to get off of this thing, and luckily you’re not too far from the front of the plane.

You follow signs posted all over when you get off, navigating unsteadily through the unfamiliar airport. After turning a corner you find a long hallway that leads to the main area of the airport, and to your relief, you can see Karkat waiting for you at the end of it.

“You follow signs posted all over when you get off, navigating unsteadily through the unfamiliar airport. After turning a corner you find a long hallway that leads to the main area of the airport, and to your relief, you can see Karkat waiting for you at the end of it.

“He, man,” you say, taking a minute to adjust your duffel bag on your shoulder.

“Too long enough,” he says with a grin. “Fucking died of boredom waiting for your ass to get here.”

“Yeah, well, here the fuck I am,” you tell him. “My ass is here, too, in case you were wondering.”

He kisses his teeth and rolls his eyes at you. “Thanks for clarifying.”

“No prob,” you say, then look around at the inside of the airport. “Yo, what’s up with this place?”

He looks in the same direction as you, down a walkway with mosaic tiles and up at the high, domed ceiling. “What? Oh, I don’t know. I guess the Reagan airport just… looks like this?”

Karkat starts walking, so you follow behind, past an empty roped off queuing area and a closed up restaurant. “You just had the carry-on, right?” he asks you. “Do we need to go down to luggage retrieval?”

“Nah, man, just got the one bag here,” you say, patting it with your hand. You walk past several shops selling high price brand name clothing, and just when you’re wondering what kind of person shops for clothes in an airport, you’re confronted with your first tourist trap. Coincidentally the only shop that seems to be open, it’s decked out in more American flags than you thought possible, and in the front window is a portrait of none other than Barack Hussein Obama himself.

“This isn’t fuckin’ real, right,” you say, taking a step in the shop’s direction. The more you look, the more obnoxiously patriotic it gets.

“Oh, it’s real, alright. There’s a few places like that at the more touristy areas. I think foreigners get a kick out of taking home something stamped with Obama’s smiling visage and overlaid with the stars and stripes.”

You consider making Karkat go in there with you and buying a USA t-shirt, then change your mind when you decide that that would be in the realm of ‘bad irony.’ You’re a seasoned veteran, and you know better than this.

“You hungry?” he asks as you head up some escalators to the upper floor. “There’s not really anything in here, but we can stop by Crystal City on the way home.”

“Wait, I thought we were in DC?” you ask. “Where is Crystal City?”

“Technically we’re in Virginia right now,” he says. “And it’s not an actual city, it’s a neighborhood a couple stops down the metro. At the stop there’s this big, like, underground mall place that should have some food.”

“Dude, I’ve only been on the east coast for like less than an hour and I’m already really damn
confused." You follow him as he leads the way through a set of automatic doors and up to an atm-like machine. Next to it are bigger, clunkier contraptions, like vending machines for your fare card or something, and you really hope you don’t have to bother with them anytime soon.

Karkat presses a few buttons and slides a ten dollar bill into the machine, rubbing it on the corner to get rid of the creases when it’s rejected the first time. And the second. And the third.

“Fucking finally. Here,” he hands you a fare card printed in green lettering that says ‘Smarttrip’ on the front when the machine finally cooperates.

“What’s this for?” You look it over in your hands.

“The metro, it’s easier than trying to mess with the paper tickets, and cheaper in the long run, too.” He walks up to one of the ticket gates, gesturing for you to go ahead of him. “Put the card on the circle thing, then just walk through.”

You do as he says, and at first it doesn’t seem to register, but you try again and the gate opens up and lets you pass. You note a small screen by the button that indicates your balance, which is apparently eight dollars.

Karkat passes through the gate next to you and leads the way up another set of escalators. “We’re really fucking lucky we didn’t miss the last train of the night, honestly. We’re pushing it here.”

You look around the platform and see a sign saying the next train is coming in ten minutes. You’re above ground, which you weren’t really expecting, and the night air is relentless even with your layered coat and hoodie.

“But the thing is,” Karkat continues, moving to a side marked ‘Largo Town Center,’ while the opposite platform says ‘Franconia-Springfield,’ which are names of places you’ve never heard of in your life. “If we go straight to my stop, which is the last on the red line, Shady Grove--”

“Shady Grove? That’s a little on-the-nose isn’t it? Are we gonna get fucking mugged or some shit?”

“If we go straight to my stop,” he repeats, ignoring you. “We’ll be waiting two hours for the bus out in the cold. My dad’s car is shit so I don’t think we should rely on him to pick us up, uh, especially considering he won’t really be. Expecting you.”

You swallow around the lump in your throat. “You sure this is okay? I know that’s dumb to ask since I’m already fuckin’ here, but--”

“It’ll be fine,” he says. “I never really had to ask to have friends over, and sometimes they’d stay for days at a time. He won’t mind, as long as you don’t act like an animal or some shit.”

“Oh man, I’ll have to try to quell my usual desire to bleat like a goat and shit on anything that ain’t a fuckin’ toilet. Your dad doesn’t have a nice oak desk or some shit like that does he? I might not be able to resist.”

“Yes, please just immediately take a dump on the floor as soon as we get there. My dad will love it and not question his son’s life choices at all.”

In the distance you hear a train coming, but on the opposite platform, so you only watch forlornly as it comes and goes, hands shoved deep into your coat pockets to keep warm.

“So… what’s the deal then? What’re we gonna do? Go to that city that’s not a city, or whatever?”
“Yeah, I think that’d be best,” he says. “I don’t know about you, but I’d rather wait indoors in a place that has food instead of freezing to death on the last desolate above-ground platform in Maryland.”

“Alright,” you shrug. “Let’s go there, then. You know best, dude, I’m just your touristy jackass counterpart.”

“True.” He laughs a little. “Maybe we should’ve gotten you something at that shop back there, make sure that everyone knows how fucking clueless you are.”

Another train comes, and you guess this is the right one, because the sign above your heads says ‘Now Arriving’ and Karkat steps up to the yellow line on the platform when it slows to a stop. You follow him into the car, which is lit up with obnoxious fluorescent lights and lined with orange seating, completely empty save for the two of you.

There’s a chime as a robotic voice tells you the doors are closing. Karkat stands near the door, leaning lazily against one of the poles, so you grab onto one nearby.

“It’s just two stops down, I think,” he says. The train starts moving, and it’s a little weird at first, standing in a brightly lit moving car with your friend at three in the morning, thousands of miles away from any place you’ve ever considered home. Okay, it’s very weird, you think.

You watch your reflections in the train window, and you think that you’re both maybe too tired to talk much right now, but that’s alright with you. Karkat’s right about it only being two stops, and before you know it, you’re following him off of the train.

The place you end up in is a lot like an indoor mall, like Karkat said. Most of the shops are closed up, large metal gates pulled down and locked over their exteriors. None of the restaurants or fast food places are open, however, so the two of you end up resorting to buying chips and soda out of an overpriced vending machine.

“I’ve never paid so much for Cheetos in my entire fucking life,” you say, watching pathetically as the machine drops the bag into the compartment at the very bottom.

Karkat pops open his own bag of potato chips. “Sorry, I thought more places would be open. But what do you know, most businesses don’t employ people at shit fuck o’clock in the morning.”

“How much more time until the next train comes round?” you ask, leaning against a concrete wall and letting your bag slide down to the floor.

“Another forty minutes, I think,” he says, joining you by the wall and sitting on the ground near your feet.

“Fuck, have we really been wandering around her for more than an hour?” you say. “Are we in some kind of liminal space right now, where time doesn’t exist or work anymore.”

“Probably.”

You walk with Karkat through the mostly empty underground building, getting eyed by the put-upon janitors and night shift security guards. The hour of the night was starting to get to you at the airport, but here it’s starting to give way to a random energy spike.

“You tired?” you ask him as you head back to the metro platform.

“Honestly? Not really,” he says. You follow him through the ticket gate after the sensor fails to read
his card several times, for no apparent reason.

“Yeah, same.”

Neither of you are much for conversation on the train ride out of the city, though an excitement builds in your chest with each passing stop. You think that maybe you’re both at that point, where you’re all talked out and settled into a comfortable silence for the night, tired mentally but physically buzzing from your circadian rhythms being fucked over.

Karkat says that there’s not many people getting on to commute to work because the train is going out of the city, which you’re glad for. You sit with him in a sectioned off portion in the back of the car, an entire seat to yourself and your bag.

Eventually the train comes up from underground, and out the windows you can see busy highway lanes on either side of you.

The sun has a few hours before it rises from the horizon, so the world is still dark outside, and it feels like nighttime instead of early morning. Karkat pulls out his phone from where he sits across the aisle, and it occurs to you and you can finally use your own.

You almost pester one of your friends, but you think twice of it. As far as anyone else knows, you’re in Texas right now with your bro. Why you thought you could hide going to DC with Karkat, you don’t really know, because you’re thinking it over now and realizing that it’s probably going to be nearly impossible, between your lack of a verbal filter and the fact that your sister’s girlfriend lives in the same town that you’re traveling to now.

You decide that’s a problem for future you, though. Probably tomorrow you. Yeah, you’ll deal with it tomorrow, and shut away all your worries about your current situation for now.

Because honestly, you’re having a hard time feeling negatively about your decision to come here instead of holing up in your dorm for weeks or having to go back to Texas to see your bro again.

You look over at Karkat, who brushes his hair out of his eyes as he looks down at his phone screen, and somehow you feel more comfortable than you have in a long time. It suddenly hits you that you’re okay with this, this spending a holiday with an unfamiliar place thing. You trust him, and you feel okay.

You spend the rest of the train ride to Shady Grove watching streetlamps pass outside your window.

=> Be Karkat.

Leading Dave through the metro system is an odd sort of experience. You never thought you’d be showing a Texan you met at your Seattle university how to use the metro, or walking around with him in Crystal City (at three in the morning, no less), or riding the metro all the way back to your stop on the red line with him sat right across from you.

But this is happening, somehow, you guess.

You try not to feel a little bit smug about knowing more than Dave on how the metro system works, and having had most of the map committed to memory. That smugness is done away with, though, by your usual bad luck with machines accepting your money or reading your cards. Having the Smartrip machine reject the your ten dollar bill three times in a row in front of your crush has got to be some special subset of purgatory.

Dave being your crush is getting a little easier to deal with though, you think. Because you’re only
It’s kind of hard to care, though.

Because to be honest, aside from the trouble you might get in, or the fact that you invited your crush to stay over at your house for several weeks, you’re pretty goddamn excited. To be home for the break, for Christmas, for any snow that might fall, for seeing your friends again and showing Dave around the city. You wonder what Terezi will think of him, or Sollux, dear god. You almost don’t even want to imagine those two meeting each other.

You get on the bus with Dave, using your last dollars on your metrocard to pay the bus fare. There’s hardly anyone leaving the metro at this hour, so you head all the way to the back and take the seats closest to the heater.

After twenty minutes you see your neighborhood coming up out the window, so you tap Dave on the arm, worrying that he might’ve dozed off like you sort of did, then grab your bag and move to stand up when the bus slows to a stop.

Dave follows you off the bus, and you hear him tell the bus driver thank you like he always does, which is so endearing it makes you want to punch yourself in the face.

A few of the other houses in the neighborhood are decked out in festive lights, still left on in the dark of the early morning. Your next door neighbor in particular has always been fond of using several yards of flashing red and green bulbs, and they blink obnoxiously at you as you approach.

“Wait, that’s not your place, is it? The one that needs a seizure warning on it?”

“No,” you tell him, walking past the bright lights and leading the way up your own steps. Just as you’re reaching to open up your bag and fish out your keys, the front door opens.

Your dad looks just as surprised as you are.

“Hey, dad,” you say, then notice his attire. “Wait, are you going to work?”

“Yes, Karkat,” he says, furrowing his brows at you. “I already texted you, don’t you ever check that damn phone?” He softens his face and looks behind you at Dave. “Who’s your friend?”

Dave doesn’t make any attempt to greet your dad, just standing there with his hands shoved deep into his pockets. “This is Dave, he’s from college. He’s staying with us.”

“He is?”

Dave take an awkward step forward. “Um, hi.”

Your dad zips up his coat over his work attire, a plain dress shirt and pants. “I have to go, I’ll see you when I get home. Good to meet you, Dave.” He pats you on the shoulder and walks past Dave and nods at him, the younger man offering a small wave in response.

That… went pretty okay?

You tell your dad bye and bring Dave inside, grateful to finally be able to take off your shoes.
You’re ninety percent certain that your dad will want to Talk to you later, when Dave isn’t around, but just as you thought, he doesn’t really seem to care about you having friends over.

The inside of your house isn’t especially warm, but it’s preferable to the frozen winter air outside. You sigh as you take off your coat, hanging it up on the coat rack behind the door and offering to take Dave’s, too.

“So, uh,” Dave says, kicking off his own shoes and placing them carefully next to yours. “Am I cool? I mean like, is it cool for me to stay here, not ‘am I cool’ in the broad sense, that would be kind of weird to just ask out of nowhere--”

“Dave,” you say, stopping him. “You’re fine. Trust me, my dad comes off as crabbier than I am most of the time, but he really doesn’t care. If he was actually mad, you’d be able to tell. As long as you’re not as destructive or loud as most of my friends, which I already know you aren’t, he’ll probably like you.”

You set your bag at the bottom of the stairs for now, and Dave does the same.

“Not that the guy is gonna be around much, anyways,” you say. There’s the smell of coffee coming from the kitchen, so you head in there through the archway connecting from the main hallway, sock-covered feet sliding a bit on the hardwood floors.

“Where does your dad even work that has him comin’ in on a Saturday morning?” Dave asks as he follows you.

“Some government job,” you say. “I don’t know the details, but he’s always taking whatever extra hours he can get.” You pause to take a mug out of the cabinet. “The cost of living here isn’t exactly low.”

“Huh,” Dave says, more to indicate that he’s listening rather than to add anything to the conversation. He leans onto the counter next to you as you pour yourself a cup of coffee.

“Want some?”

He makes sort of a face. “You will not catch me making that same mistake again. Keep your nasty bean water to your own damn self.”

“Suit yourself.”

You lead Dave upstairs, both of you carrying your heavy bags up the steps. After showing him which room was the bathroom, and which was your dad’s, you open up your bedroom door and take him inside.

You try really hard not to think about how you’re alone in your bedroom with your crush right now. Dave lets his bag fall off of his shoulder and to the floor as he looks around your room. There’s a heat spreading from the back of your neck to your face as you feel him going over every detail, and you wonder if he thinks it’s small, or if your room is dirty, or--

“Is that Will Smith?”

Oh, god, no.

“Damn, it is,” he says, going over to the wall by your bed. “What’s the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air doin’ on your wall?”
“It-- it’s a good show, okay!” you say, resisting the urge to bury your face in your hands.

The next thing Dave does, to your absolute horror, is sit down on your bed.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” you tell him quickly, and he looks a little surprised as you leave.

After shutting the bathroom door securely behind you, you lean against the door and run your hands down your face. Okay, maybe the fact that you invited a boy, who you very much have romantic feelings for, to stay at your house for an extended period of time is starting to get to you.

The only way you can imagine staying alive during this is by continuing to think of him as a dear friend, but that’s kind of hard when he’s in your room and you’re realizing that’s where he’s probably going to sleep, and there’s a good chance you might end up sharing a bed with him, and--

Fuck, okay, this thinking of him as a friend thing isn’t going so well. How many times did you and Sollux sleep in your bed together all those times growing up? And Terezi before you realized you were a boy and back when you sort of liked her? God knows it’s big enough for two people, and making him sleep on the floor would be rude as hell. Maybe you could sleep on the floor? No, you wouldn’t last more than two nights, and the back pain would only serve to make you exponentially grumpier. Which isn’t exactly a good look to have in front of your crush.

You take a deep breath. Getting all worked up about this isn’t going to do you any good, but that doesn’t stop the anxiety from swelling up in your chest.

After panicking for a bit, you do actually go to the bathroom, taking your time washing your hands and splashing a bit of water on your face. Maybe it won’t be that bad, maybe it’ll be less awkward and painful after the first night or so.

You tell yourself that a few times in a row before going back out to your room where you’ve left him waiting.

===> Be Dave.

Karkat’s been in the bathroom for a while now, and he left in such a hurry that you’re starting to get a little worried.

Despite his assurances, you got the feeling that his dad wasn’t super happy to have you as a guest for the break, the entire break, which Karkat didn’t even mention. A heavy feeling settles in your gut, and you try to think it away by replaying what Karkat said earlier in your head. Karkat told you that you’d know if his dad was mad, but growing up with Bro you’ve learned not to trust stoic appearances.

It doesn’t really help that you’ve been left alone to your own devices in this unfamiliar room in this unfamiliar house. Though you’ve never been here before, you get the same feeling you remember getting from being in John’s house in Washington. That this was an actual home, where the people who live under its roof actually love each other.

It’s weird to sort of frame it that way after only somewhat recently coming to terms with… whatever living with Bro was.

Your train of thought makes a sharp right turn when Bro comes into the picture again, and you know that you haven’t really come to terms with a whole lot at all, but you decide that that’s another problem for another future you.

The floorboards creak as Karkat comes back down the hall, the sound of it strangely comforting. He
doesn’t surprise you when he comes back into the room.

“Sorry,” he says, stepping inside and letting the door stay ajar behind him.

“So what’s the plan for today?” you ask, standing up from the bed.

He sighs and puts his hands on his hips, thinking. “Well, we could try to stay up, and either stay inside or go into town, or we could try to get some sleep now that we’re here.”

“Dude,” you say, “I know I said earlier that I wasn’t tired, but to be honest?”

“It’s starting to hit, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

He deflates a little. “We should get some rest, then.”

Neither of you move for a second, so you look around his room, awkwardly. “So…”

“My bed’s big enough,” he spits out. “Uh, for the two of us, if you don’t mind sharing.”

You shrug. “Yeah, sure, whatever, man.” Your words come out way more composed than you are currently feeling.

You both change into more comfortable clothes, Karkat leaving for the bathroom again to take off his binder. While pulling on a pair of sweatpants, your heart starts to beat weirdly in your chest. Sure, you’ve slept in the same room with other people, slept on the floor next to them, but sharing a bed is outside of your list of personal experiences.

Karkat comes back into the room wearing one of his big pullovers and a pair of black sweats, arms crossed self-consciously across his chest.

“I’m gonna set my alarm for around eleven, so we don’t sleep in too late,” he says, typing something into his phone and setting it down on the nightstand.

“Alright, that’s cool, but don’t blame me when it goes off and you’re cursing up a storm and wishing you set it later.”

He gives you a look. “I’m sorry, I don’t want my sleeping schedule to get royally fucked by jet lag, is that so much to ask for?”

You just laugh and wait for him to get in bed, taking the side across from him after setting your shades on the windowsill behind you. It’s really, really weird, laying so close to someone. There’s a good foot of space between the two of you, but something about being on the same mattress makes it all the more intimate.

Karkat has his head set back against his pillow, hair pushed away from his face, and you mirror his position. The bed is comfortable, at least, and his blanket is a big, thick comforter that covers both of you easily.

You let out a sigh, and you hear him breathe beside you, every sound amplified in the quiet room. After a moment it feels weird to just be lying side by side, so you turn away from him, which seems like the least awkward and most hetero thing to do in this situation.

After a while, though, it doesn’t feel much different than sleeping in the same dorm room with John, and the late hour starts to catch up to you, making your eyes too heavy to keep open any longer. It’s
nice, sort of, feeling the weight of another person on the mattress, his heat radiating under the shared blanket, the sound of his breathing, coming out even and slow.

Your last thought before drifting off to sleep is finding comfort in knowing that you are really, truly, safe, thousands of miles away from where your Bro is, and where he thinks you are.

Chapter End Notes

hey guys! sorry about the wait, hopefully this extra long chapter makes up for it. i worked on this fic for my attempt at nano this year and even though ill only have around 30k words by the end of it, i consider that a victory? at least that means this fic shouldn't go so long without updates for a little while

i also wanna say that in the next chapter im going to be ret-conning something i wrote in an earlier chapter, which is that jade was the only other not-cis person karkat knew. i hope that doesn't cause too much confusion? i bet ur wondering, who am i making trans by doing this? tune in next to find out! (spoiler: its kanaya. kanaya is trans. but also maybe other people? oh the suspense.)
You’re pulled from the quiet darkness of sleep by Karkat’s alarm going off, eleven am sharp, just like he said. You feel warm on one side, and you can’t quite pinpoint the source of it; you’re still half asleep, after all. As you wake up, though, you realize that at some point in the night (morning?) you turned back around to Karkat and slung your arm across his stomach.

You jerk your arm away as soon as you register what it was you were doing, and you have no idea if you were quick enough to keep him from noticing. Where your skin touched the soft material of his sweatshirt seems to buzz, and you inconspicuously flex your wrist.

Karkat groans loudly, and you hear him move beside you as the sound of his alarm is shut off. “Fuck,” he says, slumping back down onto the bed.

(Well, if he did notice, he either isn’t saying so, or is too pissed off to address it.)

“You told me you’d regret it.”

“Shut the fuck up.” He sits up from bed and sighs loudly.

“Dude, come on, just hit snooze or somethin’,” you say, turning over and nuzzling your face into the pillow.

“No, I’m getting up,” he says, then throws the blanket off of his legs and stands up. “Besides, I have a bunch of messages from my dad on here.”

“Oh, uh, is it about me?” you ask, tentatively sitting up in bed.

“No, it’s about…” he stares at his phone for a second, then looks up at the ceiling and huffs. “It’s stupid faux-concern parenty bullshit. He asked if I brought a friend home because not being on testosterone the last few months has made me ‘more emotional.’ I’m so fucking–” he cuts himself off and types something into his phone.

“The last few months?” you ask. At this point you’re not very tired anymore, and decide to get out of bed, too.

“I went off T in July because I wouldn’t be able to afford my prescription the first semester of college,” he says. “And I’ve been fucking fine, my dad’s just being an ass.”

You have more questions for Karkat, about what being on testosterone even does and what going off of it means, and if the letter ‘T’ by itself is just slang or another thing entirely. But he’s sort of starting to get worked up talking to his dad, and when he holds his phone up to his ear and you hear the dial tone from the speaker, you decide to make your escape to the bathroom.
“I’m going to the bathroom,” you tell him as you leave, and he gives you a quick nod before you shut the door.

In the hallway you hear the muffled sound of Karkat yelling at his dad, and for some reason you find it kind of hilarious that he apparently has no qualms about screaming the f-word at him over the phone. Not because of the action itself, but because Karkat’s general disinterest in being especially polite has always been sort of endearing to you.

And also because you know that deep down Karkat is genuinely a nice guy, probably one of the nicest people you’ve ever met, and one of the only people in the world who seems to sincerely care about you.

And he’s on the other side of the door telling his dad to go fuck himself.

You head into the bathroom down the hall, the bright bulbs over the mirror hurting your unobscured eyes when you flick them on. It’s not especially big or anything, and the towels on the rack near the bathtub are mismatched, but it’s cleaner and more inviting than the bathroom at your place in Texas ever was. There’s a liquid soap dispenser filled with dark purple liquid and a red wax candle on the counter and you think that it’s probably normal for a household’s bathroom to not always be sort of filthy and lacking in the essentials, like hand soap and clean towels.

You decide to stop thinking about it so much and actually take care of your business.

Karkat’s off the phone by the time you get back, a little more calm than before but still with a crease in his brow.

“Everything alright?” you ask him, and he sighs.

“Yeah, I get into arguments with him like that sometimes, it’s fine,” he huffs. “Anyway, my dad wants me to tell you that he’s happy to have you.”

“Oh.”

“But he’ll be gone until later tonight, so let’s head downstairs instead of holing up in my room all day.”

You both decide to bring your laptops and phone chargers downstairs, still wearing your pajamas and having not yet brushed your teeth or hair. Karkat’s first order of business is making himself a pot of coffee. You eat toast and sip at orange juice while he drinks two cups in a row, and you both try to wake up after your long night of traveling.

The living room is a lot like how you imagine most living rooms are, with a modestly sized TV and a big L-shaped couch. There’s a rug under the coffee table and magazines and books and various clutter scattered here and there.

You sit down on the couch with your laptop and Karkat does the same, and you both agree that today is a day for sitting inside and doing absolutely nothing at all.

“I think I should probably talk to Rose,” you say after a while, and Karkat looks over at you, surprised.

“About what? You being here, or…?”

“All of it, I think,” you say, then let out a long sigh. “I mean, she’s gonna find out sooner or later, I might as well get it out there.”
Karkat looks at you for a moment. “If you’re ready to talk to her, then yeah, you should. But don’t do it just because you think you have to.” He takes a drink of coffee, probably the last dregs of the second pot he’s made since the two of you got up. You have no idea how he drinks so much of the stuff, but the smell of it brewing in the kitchen is sort of nice, so you don’t complain.

“I just wanna get it over with, I guess,” you shrug and open up Pesterchum on your laptop.


TG: hey so
TG: i guess i have some stuff i need to talk to you about
TG: fuck that sounded super heavy and melodramatic let me try again
TG: actually never mind forget this
TT: Dave?
TG: fuck
TT: Are you alright?
TG: so
TG: how freaked out and or surprised would you be if i told you i didn’t go back to texas for the break
TG: and i uh
TG: kinda hitched a ride with karkat to stay with him in dc instead
TT: You’re in DC right now?
TG: well technically maryland
TG: im staying at karkats house rn if you dont believe me just ask him
TT: No need, I believe you.
TT: But why didn’t you go back home like you said you would?
TG: that place aint no fuckin home of mine
TG: never has never will be
TG: im never going back to that fucking hellhole
TT: Dave, what are you talking about?
TG: you said it yourself didnt you
TG: called it ‘unusual upbringing’ or some shit
TT: Did something happen? Like, recently?
TG: you didn’t find it suspicious at all that the last time i saw him i came back to school with a black eye
TT: Wait, you didn’t hit your head on the sink, did you?
TG: what do you think
TT: I…
TT: Tell me you’re not being serious right now.
TG: no lmfao this is all just a joke
TG: ashton kutchers gonna pop out any moment like
TG: haha we made you think for a moment that your brother got the shit beaten out of him by his bro
TT: Dave… I
TT: I’m sorry.
TT: I didn’t know it was that bad.
TG: but you knew it was bad
TG: you stillfuckin there or did you bail on me
TT: I’m sorry I just really don’t know what to say right now!
TG: how much did you know about how awful he was
TG: be honest with me rose
TG: did you know how terrible of a parent he was because to be fucking honest i didnt put together most of this shit until relatively recently
TT: Hmm… well.
TT: I knew my mom didn’t like him, for reasons she’s never disclosed to me.
TT: Whatever circumstances that lead to us being born always seems so… messy.
TT: I gathered that he was eccentric, an oddball, if you will. A strange distant relative that I only knew through hearsay.
TG: wait what the fuck do you mean ‘the circumstances that lead to us being born’
TT: Wait, you…
TT: You don’t know?
TG: know what
TT: That he’s our biological father?

You stare at the words on the screen, bile rising up in your throat.

TG: wait i thought
TG: that your mom
TG: our mom
TG: like she had us with someone and he was out of the picture
TT: You actually thought he was your brother this whole time?
TG: no!
TG: i knew that he wasnt my actual bro thatd be weird hes the same age as your
TG: as mom
TG: i thought they were siblings what the fuck do you mean hes like
TG: my fucking dad
TT: What, no, they’re not related at all.
TT: I’m sorry, I thought you knew.
TG: fuck this is like
TG: somehow worse than thinking that whoever fathered us fucked off forever ago
TG: because then at least hed be just some random asshole who had nothing to do with us
TG: but knowing that like the faceless dude i always thought of when i thought of ‘dad’ was like
TG: the same fucking piece of shit who raised me
TG: i dont know why but it makes me feel fucking sick for some reason
TG: why didn’t he tell me he was my dad
TT: I don’t know.

“Are you okay?”

Karkat is staring at you, and you hadn’t realized, but since sitting down at your computer you’ve sort of started to hyperventilate, tears welling up painfully in your eyes.

“Yeah, sorry, I just…” you say shakily, fingers returning to your keyboard.

TG: fuck none of this is what i wanted to say
TG: i just wanted to tell you that im in dc and that i cut off contact with bro
TT: You did?
TT: That’s good, right?
TG: i have no idea
TG: i havent talked to him since thanksgiving
TG: i dont know if hes going to try to contact me or if im making him happy by fucking off out of his life
TG: and i honestly dont know which would be worse
TG: which is so fucking stupid considering that all i can manage to feel for him right now is just like
TG: pure fucking hatred
TT: That’s all?
TT: Are you not afraid of him? Especially after what he’s done.
TT: Fear would be an understandable reaction to that kind of trauma.
TG: goddammit rose im not here to have a psych sesh about my relationship with him
TG: i just wanted to let you know whats going on
TT: Alright.
TT: Should I tell mom about this?
TG: fuck no
TT: You don’t think so?
TG: no theres no reason for her to get involved
TG: dont tell her or anyone else about this okay
TT: Why not?
TG: because its my own business and just because i just about had a mental breakdown to you in pesterchum doesnt mean that i wanna invite everyone and their fuckin mom to ask me personal shit about whether or not i keep in touch with my ‘’’dad’’’

You hadn’t noticed Karkat leaving the room, but you do see him come back in holding a big blanket in his arms. While you chat with Rose he carefully places it around your shoulders without saying a word.

The weight of it eases your nerves, and your heart does something funny at the gesture, but before you can say anything, Karkat leaves the room again.

TT: Fair enough.
TT: You do know that I’m coming to DC, though, right?
TG: what no
TG: whats with you assuming i know shit that i dont
TG: also why are you coming here wtf cant i have a moment of fucking peace
TT: You’re staying with Karkat, Dave. That sounds hardly peaceful.
TT: Also I’ve had plans to visit DC over winter break for over a month now.
TT: Can *1# not have a moment of fucking peace, Dave.
TG: oh yeah youre dating karkats friend arent you
TG: hows that going
TG: you and her
TT: It’s going…
TT: Good.
TT: It’s nice, she’s nice. I like her a lot.
TG: haha gay
TT: Dave, please.
TT: You’re the one with the extended stay at a member of the same gender’s house.
TT: I wonder what the odds are of you two having shared a bed already…
TG: B/
TG: come on this is just like
TG: normal bro stuff
TG: theres nothing gay about two bros sharing a bed
TG: like not intrinsically
TG: even if it does sound gay when i type it out like that
TT: Oh, Dave.
TG: what
TT: Nothing.
TT: Thanks for filling me in, by the way.
TG: you wont tell anyone right
TT: I won’t, don’t worry. You can trust me, Dave.
TG: well i mean i kind of already do as evidenced by all that word barf up there
TG: but thanks
TG: also when are you coming down here to see your gf
TT: In two days, but I’m leaving to go back home when Hanukkah starts.
TG: when is that you know i dont actually know shit about judaism
TT: It starts on the twenty fourth and ends on January first this year.
TG: dang so i wont see you on christmas then
TT: Dave, we don’t celebrate Christmas.
TG: you dont but i was raised by a non religious asshole i can do what i want on the holidays
TT: Fair point.
TT: Still, one of these years I’d like to spend Hanukkah with you, or any of the much more important and significant Jewish holidays.
TT: I think it’d be nice.
TG: yeah alright maybe someday
TG: hey im gonna go because i had like a panic attack talking to you i think i freaked karkat out
TT: Oh, are you alright?
TG: yeah im fine its cool
TG: ill talk to you later ok
TT: Alright. Take care, Dave.
TG: thanks ill try
TT: Love you.
TG: love you too


You sigh and close your laptop, the screen going down with a satisfying snap. Still with the blanket draped across your shoulders, you stand up and decide to find where Karkat has gone.

You take a minute to pull the fabric around you so it doesn’t drag under your feet. It’s a soft, velvety material on the outside, colored a deep red, and a fluffy off-white material on the inside. It has a good weight to it, and you’re a little distracted in your search for Karkat by how nice it feels to play with the seam at the edge, where the two materials meet.

He’s only just down the hall in the kitchen, though, stirring something in a pot over the stove. He looks at you as you enter.

“Hey, sorry,” you murmur.

“What for?” he asks. You step closer and see that it’s some kind of soup he’s warming up. “Is soup okay? I don’t really know how to cook outside of just warming shit up, and I thought maybe you’d like it?”

“Soup sounds good,” you say, leaning against the counter and pulling the blanket tighter around yourself. “And I meant for earlier, I was talking to Rose about my bro and got all upset like a dumbass.”

He sighs and pulls two bowls out of a cupboard. “You could stand to get upset more often, I think. It’s me that gets too worked up too easily. I’m the dumbass.”

You laugh a little, watching as he pours equal amounts of soup into the bowls. “You’re not a dumbass,” you tell him. “But I guess you have a point.”

“Hmm?” he says. He reaches into a drawer right beside you and pulls out two spoons.
“About me, I dunno. I guess I’m probably hella emotionally constipated.”

He sets one of the bowls on the counter next to you, spoon sliding against the round edge. “I think we both probably have emotional irritable bowel syndrome, or something,” he says with a laugh.

You don’t disagree.

After moving your bowls to the dining room, you both eat your fill of warm soup. Your spoon clinks around noisily as you fish out what you think is some kind of beef and vegetable soup, but it’s good, so you eat all of it.

“Why’d you put the blanket on me?” you ask him, stirring around the leftover broth at the bottom of your bowl.

“I don’t know,” he murmurs. “I thought it’d help. You looked upset.”

“It did sort of help, I think.” You run your fingers along the end of the fabric and pull it tighter around you. “Thanks.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just… found out some shit about my bro that I wish I didn’t know.” You suddenly feel colder, and the words stick in your throat.

“Was that when you were talking to Rose?” he asks.

You swallow thickly. “Yeah.”

“Did you tell her what happened?” he leans forward on the table, elbows propping up his chin.

“I told her a lot of stuff,” you say. Anxiety is starting to edge its way in, and you squeeze your eyes shut behind your shades, for just a second.

“Did it go alright?” he asks, and you drop your spoon into the bowl.

“Look, I really fucking don’t--” you start, the volume of your voice startling both you and Karkat. “--want to… talk about it. About anything right now.” Your outburst dies out at the end of your words but your head feels hot and heavy, and your chest pounds as you force yourself not to say anything else.

He looks at you with wide eyes, mouth hanging open a little. He clamps it shut. “Okay.”

Your heart still beats fast as Karkat stands and collects the dishes from the table and brings them to the kitchen, but before he goes, he gives you a gentle pat on the shoulder.

There’s the sound of the faucet and of silverware clanking in the sink, of Karkat opening the dishwasher, filling it and turning it on.

You keep the blanket on, because it’s comfortable and comforting, as much as an inanimate object can be, as you walk after him into the small kitchen. The dishwasher whirs loudly and you’re thankful that the house isn’t dead silent like it was moments before.

“Sorry,” you say, voice flat and small.

“For what?” he asks, and before you can get a word in edgewise he goes on. “You don’t have to apologize for having fucking emotions Dave, what were we literally just talking about right before
that?"

You let out a small, dry laugh. “Yeah, I guess you have a point. Still—” there’s another apology on your lips, but you let it die when he raises his eyebrows at you.

When you don’t say anything more, Karkat turns back to finish cleaning up, and the silence that falls after is a comfortable one.

==> Be Karkat.

You’re rudely interrupted from a dream about having coffee with a young Matthew Mcconaughey when the flourish of your cell phone’s alarm rings obnoxiously in your ear. For a moment you forget that you’re in bed with Dave, because you react to being woken up with an unattractive growl and a mumbled curse word as you shut off your phone.

But the moment passes, and you’re suddenly more lucid than you would’ve liked.

Dave’s hair is messy, so messy, and his eyes are sleepy and he smirks as he tells you that he knew you’d regret waking up at this time, before snuggling once again into his side of the bed, apparently to go back to sleep.

You want nothing more than to curl up behind him and sap his warmth, to wrap your arms around him, to feel the rise and fall of his chest and to run your fingers through his bed head.

But you have to get up. Your future self won’t forgive you if you don’t.

You’re thoroughly pulled from the lull of sleepiness by the fact that you apparently have three unread messages from your dad. And honestly, you don’t even want to deal with them until you see something about this being you ‘acting out’ and if it’s because of ‘hormonal issues’ and any and all patience goes out the window.

You’re glad Dave gets up to leave the room, because yelling at your dad about something so fucking stupid right when you wake up is nothing short of humiliating.

You really don’t want to relay the entire conversation to the narrative, but before you can angrily hang up on your dad, he does at least tell you that he’s not mad that you brought Dave over. Which isn’t a surprise, you knew that he’d be fine with it, but you could’ve dealt with not getting embarrassingly worked up trying to explain yourself.

“He has a really shitty home,” you tell him, voice lower than before. “I don’t know a lot of the details, but I know he deserves better than having to go back there or being alone all break.”

You’re chastised for your oversized heart, and you wonder if your dad can hear how hard you’re rolling your eyes over the phone.

You lead the way downstairs and get coffee started, and you make probably too much for just you, but let’s be honest, you’re going to drink it all and then some.

After waking up with a little food and coffee, you take a quick shower, not bothering to change into real clothes after. The plan for the day is to do nothing, because after all the stress of traveling and the week of finals before that, the two of you need a goddamn break.

When Dave is messaging his sister, though, something changes in his posture after a minute, and you think maybe you see him trembling. His breath hitches, but he’s still typing away, furiously, and when you ask if he’s okay, he lies.
The only thing you can think to do if you give him a heavy blanket and warm up some soup. There’s sparks in your chest when he thanks you.

After Dave’s outburst, you tell him again and again that it’s fine, because it is, even if it did sort of startle the shit out of you. You bum around some more in the living room for the rest of the daylight hours, turning on the TV to a marathon of Spongebob after some debate on what to watch.

Dave keeps the blanket wrapped around him, sometimes running his hands along the soft fabric and other times pulling it as tight as he can around himself. You wonder if Dave would like a weighted blanket, like the kind Kanaya has. She made it herself out of quilting fabric and twenty pounds of beads. You tried it yourself once, and while heavy, it was actually pretty comforting. She told you if you paid for the materials she’d make one for you, but you never got around to actually asking.

Every commercial that plays on TV is holiday themed, and you have to admit, since coming back to DC and seeing little bits of the holidays here and there, you’re actually starting to sort of get into it. There’s no tree in the house yet, so you send your dad a text to see if he can pick one up, and he says he’ll see if he can after work.

Fuck, okay, the idea of maybe decorating a tree with Dave tonight really has the hopeless romantic in you singing. The two of you in the living room bathed in the warm, pretty lights of the tree, hanging ornaments on the branches together. Maybe you both reach for the same one, and your hands graze each other, then your eyes meet--

“Okay, between Macklemore and Oscar Isaac, who do you think is more likely to vape?”

“Macklemore,” you drawl. “Are you done yet?”

“I don’t know who half these fuckin people are,” he says to himself. About an hour ago, he discovered the website whichonevap.es and has apparently been physically unable to get over it, asking you intermittently to choose between whatever two celebrities the site generates for him.

“Howie D or Matt Damon?”

“My dad’s bringing home a tree tonight,” you say, ignoring him and having just got a confirmation text. He gives you kind of a confused look. “For decorating? A Christmas tree?”

“Oh, cool,” he says, then turns back to his laptop. “But you didn’t answer my question. Oh, fuck, Matt won that one.”

“I will impale myself ass-first on the tree when it gets here if you ask me which one vapes one more fucking time.”

Dave just breaks out into giggles at your threat. “Okay, okay, but Bill Nye, or--”

You throw one of the couch pillows at him.

===> Be Dave.

“Wait, so how’s this gonna work? Is the tree gonna show up already decked the fuck out? Wait, no, that’s dumb and wouldn’t make sense,” you ramble as Karkat leads the way to the ground floor, which is apparently a whole other floor under what you thought was the first floor. Mostly, it’s just a basement made into another living room and a bunch of storage, though, so you guess you haven’t been missing much.

“Yes, that is dumb and wouldn’t make sense, thank you,” Karkat says, opening up a closet door and
pulling on a beaded string to turn on the light. The crunching metallic sound of it makes the hair on your neck stand up. “Don’t tell me you haven’t done this before, I have nowhere near enough holiday cheer to be responsible for initiating your first ritualistic ‘throwing shit on a tree’ experience.”

“Uh…” is all you say, and he stops to look at you.

“You haven’t.”

“It’s not like my bro would ever be into that stuff,” you say, face hot. “And besides, I’m pretty sure the rest of my family’s Jewish, so…”

Karkat accidentally kicks a box over, which jingles and crashes as the contents are spilled out. “Wait, what?”

He steps back out of the closet and faces you proper.

“What do you mean your family’s Jewish? Fuck, you should’ve told me. Wait, no, I shouldn’t have just assumed you weren’t like a gigantic asshole. Goddammit, I’m really sorry, Dave.”

“What for?” you say, with a halfhearted shrug.

He sputters a bit. “For roping you into all this Christmas bullshit when you don’t even celebrate the holiday?”

“Bro, chill,” you tell him. “All I know is that Rose and her mom are Jewish, and that my bro has never properly celebrated any holiday in his life. I’m totally cool with creating a fire hazard in your living room, I personally don’t have any religious affiliations whatsoever.”

He sighs. “Okay, but, I don’t want to force you to do anything—”

“You’re not,” you place your hand on his shoulder. “Karkat, it’s cool, I swear. Besides, I’ve more-or-less celebrated Jesus’ birthday many a times before.”

He gives you a suspicious look, then sighs again. “Alright, help me carry this shit upstairs, then.”

You carry up a big plastic tub into the living room, the kind with the lids that snap shut, and Karkat brings up a few boxes and another plastic tub, and you start to wonder just how many there are, and what the hell is even in these things.

The answer, it turns out, is several bunched up yards of stringed lights and boxes of ornaments, most mismatched and varying in size and color scheme. A round piece of pilled red fabric is folded up and neatly tucked under the ornament, it’s purpose, you’re not really sure. There’s a few cardboard gift boxes and bags probably left over from previous years, but what catches your eye is some kind of small white stuffed toy, buried beneath a rope of shiny silver tinsel.

“What the fuck is this thing?”

Upon closer inspection, it’s actually a pair of socks that have been stuffed and drawn on to resemble a snowman, and as soon as you address it, Karkat snatches it away from you.

“I made that in second grade, okay,” he says in a quiet voice, looking it over. “Fuck, I forgot how hideous this guy is.”

You let out a loud bark of laughter, because you really can’t help it. It’s something in the faded sharpie eyes, you think. You cover your mouth out of embarrassment but Karkat joins in with you,
and you both decide that the sock snowman from hell should live on the dining table for the rest of the holidays.

You hear a buzzing sound, and Karkat pulls his phone out of his pocket. “My dad says he’s outside, I’m gonna help him bring the tree in.”

“Oh, uh, should I…?”

“Stay put.”

Karkat slips on his vans and goes out the front door, leaving you alone with the decorations. You pull at one of the coiled up strings of lights, and up close you can see the different colors of the bulbs. Red, green, blue, clear, red again? Or is that pink? There’s another, longer string of lights made up of round little white and red bulbs, and you wonder what all of these look like when they’re plugged in.

You hear the front door open, clumsily, and Karkat backs in holding the top-end of a wrapped up fir tree, while his dad carries it in holding the stump. You step aside and awkwardly do nothing, aside from closing the door after them, while they bring it into the living room. You’ve never actually seen this process, or had any reason to imagine what it’d be like. It’s odd, very odd, when you think about it objectively. The tree is about eight feet tall and they set it up in the corner of the living room, placing it upright into a flared bucket and locking it into place.

Karkat helps his dad cut it free, both of them cursing through the process while you just sit back and try not to laugh. Karkat’s dad fluffs it out a bit, and pine needles go everywhere. There’s actually a trail of them scattered all over the carpet, on the hardwood floor in the entryway, some of them even landed on the coffee table. You wonder why no one told you this Christmas tree business was going to be so messy.

Karkat’s dad offers you a polite greeting, and tells you to tell him if you need anything, and he sort of reminds you of John’s dad. In that general dad-liness sort of way, and you start to wonder why there was never any hint of that from Bro.

Fuck, you really don’t want to think about that right now.

“So, what now?” you ask. In the kitchen, Karkat’s dad has started on making dinner, leaving the two of you with the tree.

“First we put on the lights,” he says. “Then, we pile a bunch of shit on top of it.”

“Do we put all of the different ones on there in some kind of rainbow clusterfuck, or…?” you say. “Because I saw like five different strings of lights in there, and none of them matched.”

Karkat goes over to the box and pulls out the lights you were looking at before, the round white and red ones. “We’re not putting all of them on there, if we did we’d burn our eyes out and set my house on fire,” he says.

He takes a minute to untangle the string of lights before plugging them into the outlet next to the tree. The bulbs light up, all clustered together on the floor, and it’s bright but soft at the same time. The red and white lights warm up the room and bounce off of every hard surface, casting shadows of the tree’s branches on the wall behind it.

You help Karkat wind the cord around the tree, starting from the bottom and spiraling up to the top. At the end of the cord is another plugin, to add more lights, you think, but this string by itself is a good length that goes right up to the tip of the tree, so you stop with just the one.
“What are the other lights for?” you ask. You both step back and look over the tree, and every few seconds Karkat steps forward again to adjust the way the cord sits on the branches.

“There’s two that’re for outdoors, we wrap those ones around the staircase out front some years. And I like to put the rainbow ones in my room,” he tells you.

“Rainbow lights in your room?” you ask, giving him a teasing smirk. “I didn’t know you were so festive.”

“Oh, fuck off,” he says, all lighthearted and with the hint of a smile. “Come on, help me put the tinsel on next.”

You and Karkat string shiny silver garland around the tree next, then start filling it up with ornaments. Karkat makes you put the little, shiny ones on first; he has a system, okay? He shows you how he likes to stick them near the center of the tree, and you follow what he says, not really seeing the point but enjoying the process nonetheless.

After a while, you’re both piling ornaments on the branches at random, and you watch as the bigger, glittery ones spin and reflect the lights in the tree. Karkat still steps back and moves them around every so often, using careful hands to hang the fragile bulbs off every inch of pine left too bare.

You help Karkat put the star on top, since you’re the taller one. It’s a shiny golden thing made of foil, you think, and attached to a cone that you plop over the upright branch at the very top of the tree. You ask him if it looks alright, and laugh when he makes you tilt it a tad to the left, then again to the right, then to the left again.

When the tree is done being decorated you both look it over, eyes catching on shiny lights and bulbs, and somehow you think the room feels warmer. You’ve never had a tree to decorate, but you think it looks pretty good. Karkat’s perfectionism certainly didn’t hurt, and even though some of the colors probably clash, the end result is nice to look at.

Just as you’re running a curious finger along a branch of pine needles, sap sticking to your skin and ornaments spinning from the movement, you hear Karkat’s dad call for him in the kitchen. He goes to investigate, then brings you a plate of food along with his own, and you’re glad to find out that you’ll be eating in his room instead of sitting down at the table for an awkward dinner with his dad.

You eat your food-- a real dinner, with seasoned chicken and rice and what you think might be green beans-- on the floor with Karkat’s laptop open to Netflix in front of you.

“Bro, you did not just scroll down the the romantic comedy category,” you say as he decides what to put on.

“My account, my rules,” he says, before clicking on Good Luck Chuck.

“Did you pick that just to spite me?”

“Maybe,” he says, grinning as the movie starts.

You take the piss out of the entire movie, and Karkat rolls his eyes at you, but agrees with some of your complaints. Two-thirds through the movie, you spend ten minutes ranting about just how ugly you find Dane Cook to be, and Karkat has to pause the movie because of how hard he’s laughing.

“Okay, confession time,” he says, wiping a tear from his eye.

“Oh god,” you say in anticipation, and he shushes you.
“I used to think he was really hot.”

“No, absolutely fucking not,” you say. “I refuse to comprehend that fuckin’ sentence you just said. Shit went in one ear and out the other. No way am I living in a fuckin’ world where any single person considered that melted mannequin attractive, nonetheless one of my best bros.”

“I’m serious,” he says, trying to stifle a laugh, but when you only stare at him, he cracks, and you can’t help but smile in turn. “I had a phase where I watched all of his stand up, too.”

“Please tell me that phase has long since passed,” you plead.

“I was like, thirteen,” he says. “I think that was also around my hyper girly phase? I know that at some point during seventh grade hot pink was legitimately my favorite color.”

“Hot pink?” you ask, raising a brow.

He sighs, and looks up at the ceiling, like he’s rolling his eyes at his past self. “Yeah, there was a lot of heavy handed denial in my early teens. In middle school I used to straighten my hair and wear lip gloss and mascara every day, believe it or fucking not.”

“Holy shit, you serious?” you say, and he nods. “So long have you been, fuck what’s the right phrasing—”

“Living as my actual gender? About two years now.”

“Really?” you say, and it comes out more shocked than you meant it to. “That’s not that long, right?”

He shrugs. “I guess not? It feels like it’s been longer, but maybe that’s just because I was out to most of my friends for a year before that.”

Netflix returns to the main menu, having decided that you’re not watching the movie anymore, which is probably about right.

“So, what you were saying before, with your dad and shit this morning? What exactly, uh, did any of that fuckin’ mean? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Karkat laughs, and sits up a little. “About being on T? How much of a lesson do you want right now?”

You shrug. “I dunno, the basics and shit.”

“I went on it after my seventeenth birthday, from the summer before senior year until I graduated high school. It wasn’t a very high dose, but it did leave permanent changes, like making my voice deeper and changing my hairline. Not that you can tell, because my hair’s always in my fucking face, but still.”

“Is it not all permanent?” you ask. “Also, T just stands for testosterone, right?”

“Yeah,” he says. “And no, it’s not all permanent. I had more muscle mass when I was on it, and my face was a little more angular. Fat got redistributed, too, which I really wish was still a thing. Pretty sure my freshman fifteen went directly to my hips.” He sighs.

“Why’d you go off it?” you ask. “I mean, it seemed like you liked being on it, right?” He plucks at the carpeting and twists his mouth while he thinks.

“Money, mostly. Budget’s been pretty fucking tight this first semester, but hopefully I’ll be able to
afford it the next one. I guess it’s not so bad, being off it. At least my voice is still somewhat deep. Honestly my bigger priority is getting these useless sacks of fat off my chest.” He looks down at his chest and scowls.

You find yourself looking at Karkat more intently the whole time he talks, at his face, his legs. You vaguely remember thinking his legs were nice the first time you saw him, which is kind of weird to think about now that you’re so close, literally and figuratively. He doesn’t have his binder on, and you realize that he must place a great deal of trust in you to be without it, especially considering that you’re used to seeing him sometimes without a flat chest. You’re tempted to say something, about how he’s a pretty good looking guy, hormones or no, but you get the feeling your opinion would be unwarranted, so you change the subject.

(And also because you realize that you just had the words ‘good looking’ and ‘guy’ next to each other in your internal narration.)

“Fuck, when does the next semester start anyway?” you ask. “Never mind, don’t answer that, I don’t wanna think about that shit.”

“God, me neither,” Karkat says. “I’m still fucking exhausted from finals.” He lies back on the floor, and you’re half tempted to join him.

You look down at both your finished plates. “We should go to sleep soon, huh?”

“Probably,” he sighs, and even though it’s only around nine o’clock, you both decide to get ready for bed.

==> Be Karkat.

So the tree decorating doesn’t end up like the romantic fantasy you had in mind. It was still fun, though, and a nice change of pace from previous years spent with just you and your dad. Which, to be honest, tended to end up with someone getting frustrated and cursing over a tangled cord of lights at some point.

Not to say decorating with your dad wasn’t a good time, but there’s something about Dave that tends to ease your nerves, just a bit. You’ve been noticing it more and more, and you’re not really sure what does it, but you’re less… explosive. Around him, for some reason.

(Maybe because you’re so distracted by how much you like him to get so angry? No, your crush on him is mostly a source of indignation, if you’re being honest.)

You eat dinner in your room and put on a Dane Cook movie, partly for shits and giggles, partly because you unironically still think it’s a good watch.

Dave asks you questions about HRT, and you don’t mind answering them for him. Ever since that incident after the fair, Dave’s been really considerate of everything with regards to you being trans. Talking about it at the time wasn’t a big deal, but later, when you’re getting ready for bed in the bathroom, you find yourself fixating.

You strip down to boxers and the sports bra you’ve been wearing all day. You weren’t lying about those fifteen or so pounds you gained since the start of college, or them going to your hips. With rough hands you squeeze at the fat around your waistband, pinching the skin where there’s stretchmarks and a self harm scar that never really faded all the way.

With a deep sigh you take off your bra, then just stand there for a moment, staring. Your D-cup breasts sag pathetically after years of binding, and you straddle the line between caring what they
look like under your binder and not giving a fuck because one day, hopefully, you’ll be rid of them forever.

You probably should stop looking at your body too much before you get upset, but you don’t stop, and on your next inhale you suddenly burst into tears.

It’s a stifled, strained sort of crying, ugly and messy, but quiet. You pull on your big hoodie and sit down on the toilet and hide your face in your hands, small and covered by your too-long sleeves. After a few minutes it passes, and you’re blowing your nose and wiping your eyes and wondering where the fuck that outburst came from. Because if you’re honest with yourself, you do kind of cry a lot, whether you’re on T or not, but not really out of nowhere, or just from your usual dysphoria, unless--

No, no, no, you do not want to even fucking entertain the thought of your menses finally returning after so many months of your ovaries having free reign on your body. Out of panic you check under the bathroom sink, then breathe a sigh of relief when you find an old box of pads shoved to the very back. Okay, at least if it happens soon, you’ll be prepared. But it would explain a lot, how lately you’ve felt like you might’ve put on more weight, how your breasts feel swollen and sensitive, how you still feel like your emotions are all pent-up even just after crying.

Having had enough of looking at yourself in the mirror and feeling like shit, you flick off the bathroom lights and head back to your room. You feel small, but wide, too, hips and thighs mentally taking up more space than they actually are.

You go to bed grumpy, sad and frustrated with puffy eyes, but hide it by saying that you’re really tired. Dave just folds up his glasses and places them on the windowsill, red eyes hardly visible in the dark room, and tells you goodnight when you’re both under the covers.

You mumble the words back at him and curl up into your blanket as tight as you can.

==> Be Dave.

You ease out of sleep, dreams about birds and flickering lights getting lost as consciousness comes back around. It’s dark in the room, the streetlamp outside still leaving streaks of yellow on the walls where it peaks through the blinds, and very, very quiet.

You check your phone for the time, and when you unlock it the weather app, which had auto-set to whatever town in Maryland this is, tells you that it’s snowing.

Carefully, so as not to make much noise between the creakiness of the bed and the rustling of the heavy blanket, you sit up in bed and turn around to the window. Karkat doesn’t stir at all, but you’re still nervous when you reach out to push down just one of the blinds.

The entire world outside is white, and it fills your chest up with a strange sense of calm. Big clumps of snow fall in spirals down from the sky, disappearing into the roof where they land, but you guess it must be piling up because there’s at least six inches out there already.

The streetlamps outside illuminate the snowy ground, casting cool shadows that make the world look sort of pink in between the glittery bits of white.

You watch in stunned silence, for how many minutes, you don’t know. You can’t get over just how quiet the world is right now; you don’t think any place has ever existed so comfortably without sound before.

After an uncertain amount of time spent watching the snow fall, you realize that you didn’t actually
The time is apparently only one in the morning, so you decide to try to go back to sleep. Karkat is still curled up in the blankets next to you, having not moved an inch. The room is warm, and under the covers it’s even warmer, and somehow, the snow falling outside makes it an even more comfortable heat.

You’re tired still, thankfully, because it doesn’t take long to get back into the lull of sleep.

The second time you wake up the sun is up, but the light is grey and cool and obscured even more by the blinds, which tells you that it must still be cloudy outside. A quick look at your phone tells you that it’s twenty degrees out, and still snowing.

It also says it’s nine, which is a much more reasonable time to wake up. Karkat stirs next to you, rolling over in the bed so the two of you are facing each other.

He’s obviously very sleepy, but awake, because he makes eye contact with you before reaching for his own phone.

Without saying a word, he sits up and pulls the blinds open from his spot on the bed.

The room is immediately awash with the brighter light, so you shield your eyes. When you let your vision adjust, though, you look out the window and see about another foot of snow on the ground, the entire world a shade of white you didn’t think was possible.

“Fuck, yes,” Karkat says, pressing his nose up to the window. “Oh my god, there’s so much.”

You sit up and lean on the windowsill with him, watching as smaller snowflakes fall from the sky. “I woke up earlier at like one in the morning and saw it was snowing. But shit, this way more than I thought there’d be.”

“Yeah, we get a lot of snow here,” he says. There’s steam rising up from somewhere under the window. “Last year it didn’t come until late January, though, I’m surprised we got it so early.”

He turns to you suddenly.

“Wait, you’ve never seen snow before, have you?”

“Well yeah, I’ve seen it before, in movies and shit, and just last night, but I don’t know if that still counts as the same snow-viewing experience, since technically it’s the same snowfall—”

“But you’ve never seen it in person? Gone out in it?”

“No, never,” you tell him.

You both go downstairs, sneaking glances outside at the snow with every window you pass as you follow Karkat into the kitchen.

“What should we eat?” he asks you, messing with the coffee pot in the corner counter.

“I don’t know,” you say, peering to watch the snow out the back glass door in the living room, the one that leads to the balcony. There’s thin icicles forming at the edge of the roof above the outdoor space, and frozen drops of water all along the iron banister. “Whatever we don’t have to cook, I
“Why not? You’ve never cooked before?” you lock eyes with him as he finishes his question, watching it dawn on him that the answer to that was most likely ‘no,’ and the reason why might be the same reason you had a black eye last month.

“It’s not that hard,” he says quickly. “Well, for me it is, but I’m pretty sure that’s because I’m cursed, or something. But I bet you’d be good at it.”

You stand behind him as he opens the fridge. It’s full of food, and only sort of organized, but stocked with what you assume must be most of the essentials.

“I guess I could give it a try,” you say. He pulls out a carton of eggs and creamer for his coffee.

“Okay, we can make eggs then. But I’m gonna go pee first,” he says, pulling out a frying pan from a noisy cabinet. “Don’t set anything on fire while I’m gone.” He heads back upstairs, leaving you alone.

It’s terrifying, for a minute. Being left in someone else's kitchen, a guest in their house, completely alone. You’re not really sure what to do but you… guess? That Karkat maybe wanted you to start cooking?

Wait, no, that wouldn’t make sense, considering it was pretty obvious that you’ve never done it before in your life. But you’re strangely drawn to the stove top in the kitchen, and you’re anxious to get started.

Okay, so, start with what you know. The pan goes on the heat, eggs go in the pan. You think you need a spatula, and after checking about six different drawers, you find a red plastic one. Turning the heat on takes a couple tries, because the knob doesn’t seem to want to turn and you don’t want to accidentally break something, but it turns out that you had to just push it in before twisting. Somewhere in the middle seems like an okay heat, you think, so you set the pan over the coiled bit of metal you guess you’ve just turned on.

On the counter by the stove is something labeled ‘butter flavored cooking spray,’ what the fuck that means, you’re not sure. But you do think that you just sort of… spray it into the pan. Okay, so far, so good.

You’ve never cracked an egg before, but you’ve seen it done. Just smacking it against the pan should do it-- and you smacked it too hard, breaking the eggshell in on itself and getting raw egg on the stove. Great.

You curse under your breath as you throw away the ruined egg, glad in hindsight that you already knew where the trashcan was. After rinsing off your hands, you try again, failure fueling a sudden, weird desire to get this egg cracking thing down.

The second time you manage to pry the egg open and get all the contents into the pan, which makes a loud hissing sound upon contact. You watch as the edge of the egg cooks and become less translucent, then try poking it around with the spatula.

“You're doing this all wrong.”

You jump out of your skin when you hear Karkat’s voice behind you, dropping the red spatula onto the floor.

“Shit, how long were you standing there?” you ask. He reaches into the drawer beside you and
hands you another spatula, except this one is black and well-used.

“Long enough to watch you fail at breaking an egg,” he says. You pout a little bit. “Don’t sweat it though, I’ve done a way worse job than that, believe me.”

You’re trying to imagine how badly of a job Karkat could possibly do just cracking an egg, when you realize that you should probably try to flip the egg in the pan sometime about now.

After cooking a couple more eggs, each one a little bit better than the last, you sit down with Karkat at the dining room table with some toast and orange juice.

“I’m pretty impressed,” Karkat tells you after taking a bite. “For your first time, these are pretty damn good.”

You feel your face heat up. “Uh, thanks I guess.” You eat some of your own food, not really sure if you made them ‘right’ or whatever, but they do taste good, and it’s a strange feeling to be eating warm, real food that you made yourself.

Karkat checks his phone at the table. “It’s supposed to snow until noon, and the high is fucking twenty-eight, so it’s not going to melt anytime soon.” He sighs and takes a drink of coffee. “What should we do today?”

You think it over, chewing on your toast and taking a drink of juice. “What can we do? Like, with the snow and all.”

A strong wind blows outside, carrying loose powdery snow with it.

“It depends on how much of the cold you can handle,” he says. “We could stay in all day, or try to go to town or the city, I guess. It’s the weekend, but with the weather there might not be a lot of people around.”

“Dude, if I’m going out in that shit, I need some goddamn gloves,” you tell him.

Karkat lets you borrow a spare pair of his dad’s gloves that he finds in the closet while fishing around for a heavier coat. He grabs some scarves, too, and a red knitted hat paired with matching gloves.

“There’s a shopping center just down the street where we can get you your own pair,” he says. “And some more food, I don’t think my dad went shopping for two extra mouths, judging by how empty the pantry is.”

Karkat opens up a folding door in the kitchen that you hadn’t noticed before, chin in his hand as he looks over the contents. Inside is even more food, boxes and cans and bags of all sorts of stuff, and you’re not really sure what Karkat is talking about, because it looks well-stocked to you.

Not that you’re used to seeing pantries being used for their intended purpose, or anything.

You head upstairs and pull clothes out of your bag for the day. A pair of jeans, long socks, one of your long sleeved shirts and your red hoodie, if you layer those under your coat you think you’ll be pretty warm. It’s hard to know, though, just how cold it’s going to be outside, having never seen weather below forty degrees until now.

Karkat dresses in the bathroom, probably because it’d be pretty damn weird for the two of you to dress in the same room like you and John do. He comes out wearing a big black and white fair isle sweater and a pair of grey jeans.
You grab your phone, wallet, and sunglasses, then pull on your shoes and coat by the door while Karkat wraps a long black scarf around his neck.

“Here,” he says, after fitting his red beanie over his hair. He hands you a pair of cotton gloves and a dark red scarf.

You wrap the scarf around your neck the same way you’ve seen your sister and Jade tie their scarves, on backwards and then pulled to the front again and tied in a secure knot. You think it looks okay? It does feel warm, though, and when Karkat goes to open the door and the freezing air outside hits you, you’re immensely grateful that you have on as much as you do right now.

“Ready?” he says, laughing a little bit. A gust of wind blows by and sweeps snow into the house, so you step outside and let Karkat shut the door.

There’s snow piled up a few inches on the stair rail, and you can’t resist dragging your hand through it as you follow Karkat down the snow-covered steps. It’s light, so light, and compacts into ice when you squeeze your hand around it.

There’s a wobbly little snowball made from the imprints of your closed fist in your hands, and the only thing you can think to do is throw it right at Karkat.

“Thanks,” he says as it hits him softly in the chest. “Are you done?”

“No,” you say, piling up more snow from the banister in your hand. He reaches down and quickly picks up a large clump of snow to retaliate.

It’s too soft and powdery to do much of anything, though, but you still turn to dodge Karkat’s throw. You throw your next snowball and it misses, and so he responds by flinging a handful of loose snow in your face.

You’re both laughing wildly, and you’ve only barely made it to the sidewalk.

Nearby a dog barks, and you jump, the noise loud and gruff and setting off your panic alarms. Down the street is a girl around your age, wearing a teal peacoat and a bright red scarf and matching cat-eye sunglasses, being pulled along by a giant brown dog with golden eyes.

“Terezi!” Karkat calls out, approaching her.

“Vantas?” she says, turning her head in your direction. “Shit, is that you?”

Karkat goes to her and she gives him a clumsy hug, and you follow him cautiously. The sidewalk is covered in snow, and the way that dog is looking at you has you more than a little unnerved.

“Who’s this with you?” she asks as you approach. “I don’t know them, do I?”

Her dog lurches forward when you come close, but stops at the end of its leash, wagging his tail so hard his butt moves from side to side. Okay, that’s pretty fucking adorable.

“This is Dave, one of my friends from college,” Karkat says. “His sister’s the girl who’s dating Kanaya, you remember we met her at Starbucks that one time?”

“Why do you have Kanaya’s girlfriend’s brother with you?” Terezi asks. Her dog continues to shake his butt.

“I--” Karkat starts to say.
“Karkat kidnapped me and is holding me hostage in his house for the holidays,” you tell her. “But don’t worry, it’s like, totally a consensual kidnapping kind of thing.”

“I like this guy already,” she laughs, showing off large, uneven teeth. “Name’s Terezi. And this dumb little baby,” she gestures to her dog, “is my guide dog, Paarthurnax. Sorry if he scared the shit out of you guys, he’s still learning not to bark so much when he’s off duty.”

“He didn’t scare me at all,” you say, crossing your arms nervously against your chest.

Karkat offers his hand to the dog and pets his head after he sniffs it, so you try the same thing. His breath comes out hot against your palm and he tries to lick your glove, and leans into your touch when you pet him on the crown.

“Holy shit, I love this dude.”

“I was just giving him a walk, but what are you guys doing out in this shit?” she asks, then grins. “Gonna have a snowball fight? Because if you are, you have to let me play too.”

“Maybe later,” Karkat says. “We were just leaving to buy food and other shit. Let me get my errands done before you whitewash me into a gravel laced snowbank.”

“You shove a guy’s face into snow one time in the fifth grade and he never forgets it,” she says, shaking her head. “I’ll see you guys later, then.” She gives Karkat a playful punch in the arm, and you pet her dog one more time on the head before they both walk away.

“That one of your high school friends?” you ask Karkat when you make it to the end of the block.

“More like, one of my elementary, middle, and high school friends. I’ve known Terezi since kindergarten.”

“Dang,” you say. “I can’t imagine knowing anybody for that long, like, in real life. I guess I’ve been friends with John and Jade for a long time, but not since I was five, shit.”

“What about your school in Texas?” he asks. You come to an intersection and wait for the light to change.

“Nah, didn’t really have any friends growing up. And the ones I did have either left me for more popular kids or moved away.”

“Oh… I’m sorry, that’s really shitty,” Karkat says. The light changes and you lead the way across.

“Eh, it’s whatever,” you say, shoving your hands in your pockets. “It doesn’t really matter now, I guess.”

A car honks at the two of you as you pass the crosswalk, and Karkat flips the driver off.

“Fucking asshole,” he says. “Anyways, Dave…” He stops when you reach the other side of the street.

“Yeah?”

“I just wanna say…” he doesn’t look right at you, eyes cast instead to the side. “That you do have friends, now. And I know that sounds really fucking cheesy, but–”

“Thanks,” you say. “I know, and I’m really goddamn grateful. So can we…?” You jerk your head towards the end of the street. “Standing still is making the cold worse, I think.”
“Yeah, sorry,” he says, and the two of you walk another block along the snow covered sidewalk, which makes satisfying crunching sounds under your feet. By the time you reach the shopping center Karkat mentioned, the bottom of your jeans are soaked.

You weave through the parking lot, surprisingly full considering the weather, walking past storefronts selling shoes and sandwiches and pet supplies. Karkat walks until he reaches Target, and you follow him inside past the weirdly ominous red spheres at the entrance.

Inside it’s warm enough to loosen your scarf and take off your gloves. Karkat does the same and lets out an exhausted sigh.

“The buses better be fucking running by the time we’re done here.”

Karkat takes one of the baskets by the door. “Okay, so, let’s get the winter shit before food.” You shrug and follow after him, glad that he’s taking charge, but you’re just now realizing that you’ve never actually shopped in a Target before.

You pick out a pair of red gloves that fit your hands alright, nothing fancy or anything, and a black knitted hat with a little pom pom at the end. When you try it on, Karkat sits it back on your head so it doesn’t cover your bangs and look stupid, and when you take it off and toss it in the basket your hair is left all staticy.

Karkat leads the way to the food aisles, and you both proceed to pick out utter trash from the shelves. Because you’re two boys who are only barely adults, and honestly with Karkat’s dad stocking the shelves at home with proper food, there’s no excuse for this not be a snack run.

Well, there are probably plenty of excuses, but you ignore those in favor of picking out three different flavors of instant ramen, while Karkat grabs goldfish crackers and peppermint coffee creamer. There’s a table full of candy on sale, and Karkat doesn’t protest when you toss a few bags of chocolate and candy canes into the basket. The only things with any semblance of nutrition are the cans of soup Karkat picked out, and even those are kind of pushing it.

When the basket full of food is too heavy to carry, you both make your way to the checkout line and, after some arguing with Karkat who insists on paying for it all himself, you split the bill.

Karkat holds the bags while you put on your new hat, not bothering to put on your new gloves yet since you’re still borrowing his dad’s pair. You take half of the bags from him and begin the walk home, the buses unfortunately not running by the time you leave. You walk past all the same shops as before, and just as you’re about to step into the parking lot, you hear a voice.

“Karkat, is that you?”

You look over at who called Karkat’s name, and see a very tall, elegant woman with a thick jade green headscarf and a long red skirt. She approaches him and he gives her a loose hug, careful around all the bags of food. She rustles the hair on his head just a bit with one of her hands.

“It’s good to see you, Karkat,” she says, voice low and soft, smile shining bright against black lipstick. “Sorry I didn’t see you much last break.” She looks over at you. “Who’s your friend? I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Karkat turns to you, leaving the hug a bit stiffly. “This is… Dave. He’s, uh, one of my friends from college.”

She looks you over. Really looks you over, and you wonder if maybe you have something on your face. “Nice to meet you, Dave, I’m Kanaya,” she says politely. “Karkat’s told me lots about you.”
“Wait, you’re Rose’s girlfriend, aren’t you?” you ask, brain stuttering a little bit on the fact that Karkat has apparently talked about you to her at some point.

“I am,” she seems to blush a little. “And you’re her brother. I must say, there’s quite the resemblance.” She looks over at Karkat when she says that last word, and he seems to glare at her. Whatever sort of internal dialogue they’re having, you have no idea, but it is pretty hilarious to watch.

“Dave and I were just…” Karkat says, “Going. Uh, back to my place.”

She raises her brows. “Is that where you’re staying?” she asks you.

“Uh, yeah,” you say. “Ain’t got anywhere else to crash.”

“Huh,” is all she says. “Well, I have some more shopping to do, I’ll leave you boys to your business. Oh, but when Rose comes down, we should meet up, alright?”

“Yeah, okay,” Karkat tells her. “We’ll hang out with you. Later. When Rose is visiting. But bye for now.” He starts to walk away, so you just give Kanaya an awkward wave and follow after him.

Karkat is red in the face and very determined to leave, so you decide not to ask.

==> Be Karkat.

Seeing Kanaya at the shopping center is a pleasant surprise, especially considering that last break you hardly saw any of her at all. That pleasantness is washed away, though, when Kanaya turns to Dave.

“Karkat’s told me lots about you,” she says. You shoot her the nastiest glare you can manage. She makes eye contact with you way more than you would fucking like the entire time they talk, and your cheeks are burning so hot there’s no way it’s not noticeable.

You leave her as quickly as you can and thankfully Dave doesn’t ask any questions, either not interested in why you bolted out of there or having just not picked up how painfully awkward that was.

On the walk home, more of the sidewalk has been shoveled and there’s salt all over the cleared pavement. Dave kicks a few of the clear crystals as he walks and you wish you didn't find him dragging his feet like that so fucking adorable.

When you get back, you’re tired enough to not be bothered by Dave throwing his stuff on the floor in the entryway. You’re tempted to do the same, but instead you take your scarves and gloves and long knit socks and throw them in the dryer for now. There's an unread text on your phone.

“Terezi wants us to meet her at the park in like an hour,” you tell Dave after shelving all the cans of soup and boxes of food in the pantry. You just throw the bag of candy on the counter, and he rips open one of the bags of chocolate kisses.

“We gonna do that?” he asks, before shoving his mouth full of candy.

“Yes, if you want,” you say, taking one of the chocolates for your own and unwrapping the green foil. “It’ll be the least cold part of the day, so if we’re gonna dick around in the snow, we might as well do it then.”

“Alright, sounds fun,” he shrugs. He folds one of the foil wrappers into a perfect square, then crushes
It into a ball. “What should we do until then?”

You heat up some more soup for the two of you and eat in your room, both distracted by your own laptops. It’s sort of nice, though, just sitting and eating with him, scrolling through your dashboard and rolling your eyes at him whenever he tries to show you another meme.

Out of curiosity, you log into Pesterchum, and as soon as you’re signed in you receive a message.

-- grimAuxiliatrix [GA] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 13:02 --

GA: Why Is Dave At Your House What On Earth Is Going On
CG: LOOK, I CAN EXPLAIN.
GA: Thats What You Said Last Time
GA: When He Was Passed Out In Your Room
GA: Whats With You And Ending Up In Suspicious Circumstances With This Boy
CG: THESE AREN'T SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES!! WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
CG: HE DIDN’T HAVE ANYWHERE TO GO FOR WINTER BREAK, SO I OFFERED HIM MY HOSPITALITY.
CG: IS THAT SUCH A FUCKING CRIME.
GA: What Sort Of Hoops Did You Have To Go Through At The Airport To Get Him Here
GA: Nevermind I Dont Want To Know
GA: Dont You Think This Is A Little Bit Dangerous Though
GA: Romantically Speaking
CG: WHAT IS *THAT* SUPPOSED TO MEAN??
GA: Oh Come On
GA: Being In Such Close Quarters With Him Cant Possibly Be A Good Idea
GA: Say Something Happens And Your Feelings Come Out
GA: It Could End Up Quite Awkward If Your Attempt To Woo His Doesnt Work Out
CG: JESUS FUCK, MARYAM, I DIDN’T BRING HIM HERE TO TRY TO ‘WOO’ HIM.
CG: AND I DEFINITELY DON’T HAVE ANY PLANS TO MAKE ANY FUCKING MOVES ON HIM WHILE HE’S HERE.
CG: ON THE SAME DAY I TOLD YOU I LIKED HIM HE MENTIONED TO ME THAT HE WAS STRAIGHT IN AN UNRELATED CONVERSATION.
CG: SO THAT SHIP HAS FUCKING SAILED.
CG: NO SURPRISE THERE, CONSIDERING ANY OF MY ATTEMPTS AT DATING HAVE AND ALWAYS WILL BE HOPELESSLY FUTILE.
GA: Oh
GA: Well Thats Unfortunate
GA: As Straights Are Always Wont To Be
CG: TELL ME ABOUT IT.
GA: So What Now Then
GA: Youre Just Going To Be Friends With Him And Do Away With Your Feelings
CG: THAT’S WHAT I’M FUCKING *TRYING* TO DO, YEAH.
CG: BUT HE’S MAKING IT REALLY GODDAMN HARD.
CG: DOING CUTE SHIT ALL THE TIME THAT’S NOT EVEN THAT CUTE, I JUST THINK THAT IT IS BECAUSE HE’S THE ONE DOING IT.
CG: WE’RE JUST SITTING IN MY ROOM EATING SOUP, AND HE’S SHOWN ME ABOUT FIVE PEPES ALREADY.
CG: WHY IS THIS ENDEARING TO ME.
GA: I Have A Question
GA: Your House Doesnt Have Any Guestrooms Does It
GA: Where Does He Sleep
CG: FUCKINDFGLHJP;
CG: YOU JUST HAD TO FUCKING BRING IT UP, DIDN’T YOU?
CG: YOU ASTUTE PIECE OF SHIT.
CG: OKAY, YEAH, WE ENDED UP SLEEPING IN MY BED TOGETHER.
CG: IS THAT WHAT YOU FUCKING WANTED TO HEAR?
GA: Oh My God
GA: Karkat Honestly How Are You Still Alive
GA: If I Shared A Bed With A Girl I Had Unrequited Feelings For I Would Be Crushed To Death By My Own Tragic Gayness
CG: IT
CG: OKAY, IT WASN’T AS HORRIBLY AWKWARD AS I THOUGHT IT'D BE.
CG: IT’S NOT LIKE WE WOKE UP FUCKING SPOONING EACH OTHER, OUR LIMBS ALL TANGLED UP IN THE SHEETS LIKE IN YOUR EVERYDAY SHITTY ROMANCE NOVEL.
GA: Karkat You Love Those Novels Dont Pretend You Dont
GA: Also I Think The Sharing A Bed Thing Is A Shitty Romance Novel Trope That Youve Already Fallen Into
GA: So You Dont Really Have Much Of An Argument
CG: KANAYA, WHAT THE FUCK AM I GOING TO DO?
CG: I GUESS I ALREADY DUG MY OWN GRAVE HERE, DIDN’T I?
CG: DO I JUST HAVE TO LAY IN THIS SHITTY HOLE UNTIL I DIE OR DON’T HAVE ANY FEELINGS ANYMORE?
GA: Seems That Way
GA: Unless He Can Be Convinced To Abandon The Ways Of Heterosexuality
GA: Which Is Actually Really Hard When You Are Not Straight I Shouldnt Joke About That I Guess
CG: I DON’T KNOW, I DON’T WANT TO GET MY HOPES UP.
GA: Well Has He Ever Expressed Disinterest In You
CG: I… I DON’T KNOW. I GUESS NOT??
CG: BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN ANYTHING, WE’RE JUST FRIENDS.
GA: Hmm
GA: Do People Travel Across The Country To A Place Theyve Never Been To Stay With Someone Theyre ‘Just’ Friends With
CG: LOOK, KANAYA, I’M TELLING YOU.
CG: THINGS ARE STRICTLY PLATONIC BETWEEN US, AND EVEN THOUGH I’D *LIKE* FOR THINGS TO HEAD IN A ROMANTIC DIRECTION, THAT’S JUST NOT GOING TO HAPPEN.
CG: LET’S NOT MAKE THIS MORE CATASTROPHICALLY AWKWARD THAN IT NEEDS TO BE.
GA: Hmm
GA: I Suppose I Dont Know Enough About Him Or Your Relationship To Be Much Of A Judge
CG: YES, EXACTLY.
GA: But That Will Change When Rose Visits And The Four Of Us Have Our Double Date In Georgetown
CG: WAIT, WHAT?


CG: KANAYA, WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
CG: WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY A DOUBLE DATE?
CG: KANAYA?
CG: HFHHRGARRGHHGHGHRUJHLFJGK’GRJOH
Chapter End Notes

hey y'all, heres another super long chapter! theres more winter chapters to come, too.
dear god. ive written so much already and im still not done. i have college applications
to do and im writing thousands of words of hs fanfic where dave and karkat do nothing
but eat and talk. help me.

also!! i wanna say that ive gotten lots of super nice comments that i havent had the
chance to individually reply to, but @ everyone who's left a comment here: thank you
so much!! i hope you like where this story is going so far (:B
hey y'all! sorry for posting the ~christmas chapter~ a few days after the holiday, hopefully the length makes up for the wait?

warnings for this chapter: menstruation, medication, smoking, talk of abuse and neglect

==>

Be Dave.

Your hat and gloves come blissfully warm out of the dryer, and when you’re getting dressed to head back outside you’re really goddamn glad that Karkat thought to throw all that shit in there. Even just standing by the front door is enough to make you cold, and for a moment you consider not even going back out there.

Terezi and her dog greet you again, and you all walk over to a park right outside the neighborhood. It’s empty and blanketed in more than two feet of snow, but there’s a playground with a swingset that is probably more appealing to three college students than it had any business being.

The wind blows so hard you can’t tell if what’s hitting your face is falling from the sky or being picked up from the ground, or an unholy combination of both. You pull off your sunglasses and fold them over the hem of your shirt, the snowflakes rendering them useless for now. It’s bright outside, and your eyes sting for a moment, but you force yourself to keep them open as they adjust.

You look over at Karkat just as the wind blows clouds past the sun, letting the warm light fall over you for a few minutes before more clouds fly by to take their place. There’s bits of snow all over his hair, tiny white crystals clinging to the dark strands, weighing down his usually fluffy look. It sticks to the pieces framing his face, and in a momentary lapse of judgement, you reach out and brush it away.

He jumps at your touch, then softens his face when he realizes what it was you did. He makes a sound like he was going to say something, but then turns away to talk to Terezi instead. You think you see a blush creeping onto his cheeks.

Quickly, you use the hem of your shirt under your coat to wipe the melted snow off your glasses and place them back onto your face. Your heart’s beating fast, pulse thrumming against your eardrums, as you try to figure out why the actual Fuck you just did that, and… okay.

Okay, so you think that the way the snow was stuck in Karkat’s hair was nice, and you wanted to touch him. His hair, you mean, not him, just the thick black fibers hanging off his head and--
goddamnit, this isn’t working.

Karkat is attractive. There, okay, you can admit that to yourself, as an objective fact. He has a nice face, and pulls off the messy haired look pretty well. He has a nice smile, whether he’s laughing loudly and fully, or grinning at one of your shitty jokes. He’s aesthetically pleasing, you decide. It doesn’t have to be something more than that, or a Thing at all. You don’t have to make this weird, okay?
Terezi laughs loudly when her snowball hits Karkat in the back of the head, and continues laughing as he chases her out into the snow to get revenge. The dog is barking and following after them, running to catch every snowball that misses its target.

You just sit back and watch on one of the swings, pushing yourself back and forth just slightly with your feet. It’s been a long time since you’ve been on one of these, and it’s kinda hard to remember what to do. Under you, there’s at least a foot of snow impeding your movement, so that doesn’t exactly help, either.

You let yourself fall off the back of the swing, laying down in the thick blanket of snow under you. It’s an odd feeling to view a swing set from this angle, the triangular bars touching the blue skies up ahead, the belt of the seat swinging lazily above you from when you disembarked. The endless bare branches of a tree stretch out against the sky, and you wonder why you’re only just now noticing how big the trees are here.

The cold seeps through your clothes, but it’s oddly comfortable to lay in the snow. You lift your shades up to your brows and again the world is so, so bright. The falling snow from the angle sort of feels like flying up through it, if you unfocus your eyes just right, and for a few minutes you just indulge in the optical illusion.

With an awkward set of gloved fingers, you fish your phone out of your coat pocket and aim it at the sky, swiping to the photo app and taking three pictures in a row.

Out of curiosity, you swipe over to selfie-mode.

Your own face takes you by surprise.

The freckles on your skin are almost hidden by how flushed your cheeks are, and the tip of your nose is a shade of pink you’ve never seen on yourself before. Your eyes are still exposed, the unnatural color standing out against your white eyelashes.

You look at yourself for a long, long time. Long enough for the screen to go black, then longer at your reflection in the darkened glass.

You watch your eyebrow twitch, and your eyes blink, and the way your mouth looks when you lick your lips, and what your nose does when you snuffle a little bit, because of the cold.

There’s that familiar, far-away feeling in your head, where everything seems so unreal, but you think that the reason that your face looks so weird to you right now is because you’ve never seen yourself look so human before.

“Dave!” Terezi calls out, stomping through the deep snow. “What’re you doin’?”

“Just chillin’,” you say, and she laughs loudly at your dumb joke.

Karkat follows behind her, the snow easily going up to his knees with every step. You smile to yourself as he stumbles through the snow, and figure that you should meet them half-way at the other end of the playground. Paarthurnax jumps happily through the deep snow after them, and you try throwing another snowball to see if he’d chase it, and he does.

“Get on the tire swing,” Terezi tells the two of you. “I wanna see how fast I can spin you two around.”

“Can we even fit on that thing?” Karkat asks. The swing itself is just a regular old tire with three chains attached, and you’re not even sure how you would sit on it, let alone share it with another
person.

“Just go back-to-back,” she says, pushing Karkat towards it. He takes one side and you try to balance his weight by taking the other. You’re thinking that you’re not really back-to-back so much as sort of side-to-side, when Terezi grabs one of the chains and pulls.

You try to brace yourself by grabbing the chain behind Karkat, but he has a similar idea. Your heart leaps into your chest, because you get close, really close, and your first thought is I could kiss him right now.

Abort, abort. Right the fuck now.

“Ow, fuck!” Karkat says, and you see him gingerly pull a gloved hand away from one of the chains. “Fuck, my hand just got stuck to the chain.”

“You’re wearing gloves,” Terezi argues.

“It stuck through the fucking gloves, then,” he spits back.

You let go of the chain yourself, and hiss when it seems to cling to the base of your palm. “Maybe the tire swing shit isn’t such a good idea,” you say, and goddamn are you glad for an excuse to get off of this thing.

“What now, then?” Karkat asks as he slides off the swing, leaving you so unbalanced that you slide off, too.

There’s a trail running through a wooded area nearby, where Terezi says ‘the others’ are probably hanging out. You follow her over there, laughing as you traverse the deep snow and earning a glare from Karkat whenever you offer to help him when he stumbles. Under the trees, though, the snow is lighter. While making your way past thin branches that threaten to hit you in the face at every turn, you notice a set of unusual prints running through the snow.

“What are these?” you say, pointing at them when you have the others attention. The prints are long and narrow, tapered off at the tip, gathered in two in a long straight line. They sort of look like little quotation marks in the snow, or no, maybe coffee beans? You decide to throw out a guess. “Are these deer tracks?”

Karkat looks them over. “Yeah, pretty sure they are. There’s always some of those hooved little fuckers prancing around here. Why?”

You shrug. “I dunno, I spent like a week looking at fossilized footprints and shit once. Let me just apply my obscure and borderline useless interests to real life for once.”

“Your interests aren’t useless,” he says. Before you can reply, he sinks down into an especially deep part of the snow and gets his feet stuck, falling forward into the snow too, for good measure.

The sound of his cursing drowns out your laughter as you struggle to help him out of the mess he fell in.

When you emerge from the woods, you come across a frozen pond. Around the side of it is an open field, with a few people building some kind of large structure in the snow. A girl with long, tangled, black hair and a deep red coat calls out to you.

“Is that Aradia?” Terezi asks Karkat as you all skirt along the edge of the frozen water.
“Yeah,” he says, smiling a little bit as he trudges through the snow. Okay, so they apparently know these people.

As you get closer, you see that the large structure they’re building is a snow castle of sorts, with walls that are almost five feet tall and an angry snowman guarding the entrance. The girl who called out slides down from the top, followed by another girl with hair just as long, wearing a blue and green scarf with a hot pink coat.

“Hey guys!” says the other girl, flashing a big smile at the three of you and greeting Terezi’s dog when he wiggles up to her.

“They brought a new friend,” says the girl in red, looking right at you. You suddenly feel like the outsider that you are, and it doesn’t help that most of the other people turn to look at you then, too.

“New friend?” someone calls out. You see a short figure pop out from one the castle walls, wearing a blue hat with cat ears on it. Behind them is an intimidatingly tall dude with long, greasy hair and a crack in the lens of his glasses.

Everyone looks at you, save for a person at the top of the castle who doesn’t seem to give two shits. You guess you should introduce yourself.

“Uh, hey y’all. I’m Dave,” you wave awkwardly, and wince a bit when your accent slips out.

A sloppy chorus of “Hi, Dave,” rings out from the group.

“Let me introduce everyone.” The girl in red breaks a long, thin icicle off the edge of the castle roof, and you wonder how long they’ve been working on this thing. She points the tip at the girl next to her. “This is Feferi.”

“Hi!” Feferi waves, smiling so big that dimples form in her chubby cheeks, flushed from the cold.

“That’s Tavros,” the other girl continues, pointing at a dark-skinned boy with a mohawk sitting down in a plastic orange sled. You saw him being pulled along before, and you think that maybe he doesn’t have full use of his legs. He waves and flashes you a big smile, and okay, goddammit, here’s another extremely aesthetically pleasing ass dude you gotta deal with.

“Uh, hey,” he says, voice cracking in the middle.

“And that’s Sollux,” she says, pointing at the guy up top. “They’re shy,” she adds cheekily.

Sollux continues to sit on the pile of snow, not doing much except messing with their phone. They have on those gloves with the different colored tips that you guess are for touch screens, and you immediately get the feeling that this guy doesn’t like you very much.

Karkat calls them a fucker and attempts to remove them from the top of the castle, but is met with a boot to the chest and the other kid telling him to fuck off.

They’re good friends, probably.

The big guy and the cat hat kid are introduced as Equius and Nepeta respectively. Equius seems to be sweating despite the cold, and Nepeta waves the ends of her too-long sleeves in greeting.

She directs the icicle at her own chest, both hands clasped around, sharp tip pointed right at her heart. “And I’m Aradia.”
You can’t tell if she means for it to look like she’s about to take her life Juliet-style or not. “Nice to, uh, meet you,” you tell them.

There’s a guy hanging back that Aradia neglected to introduce, wearing an awful lot of purple and looking wholly dejected. He approaches you when Aradia steps away to make snow angels with Feferi.

“Since Aradia apparently doesn’t consider me worthy of an introduction,” he runs a hand through purple-streaked hair and pushes up the Ray-Bans on the bridge of his nose. “I’m Eridan, pleasure.” He extends a hand towards you.

You bump it with your fist, and watch his face fall as he goes through the five stages of grief in three seconds. Next to you, Karkat is trying really hard not to laugh.

He hums as he retracts his hand. “So where’re you from, Dave?” he asks. His voice has the undertone of some kind of accent, or maybe just a really posh affect.

“Oh,” you say, trying to hide your hesitation. “New York.”

“You?” he asks. Karkat looks at you out of the corner of his eye.

“Upstate.”

He makes a noise of approval. “So what brings you around ‘ere?”

You stutter a bit, and look over at Karkat.

“Dave and I met at college, he’s visiting here with his sister, who’s dating Kanaya,” he says, short on patience and glaring up at him. “Are you done with your interrogation?”

“Kan has a gee eff?” he murmurs, folding a gloved hand under his chin. “And yes. Whatever. Sorry for trying to be polite.” He turns and goes back over to where Feferi is playing in the snow.

You raise a brow at Karkat, and he grumbles something about how Eridan can be “so fucking annoying,” and you wonder if maybe he’s starting to get into a bad mood.

With all this snow at your expense, you and Karkat decide to make a snowman to join the one already at the castle gate. You quickly realize that building a snowman is harder than you thought, and that snow compacted into a giant sphere is definitely heavier than it looks.

When stacking them on top of each other seems impossible, you push the two balls together and set out to make a giant penis instead. Needless to say, Karkat isn’t amused.

Just as he’s trying to forcibly stop you from making the snowdick’s shaft, you hear a laugh from above you. When you look, you see Sollux grinning as Karkat kicks one of the balls apart.

“Dude, your friend worked so hard on that,” they say, tucking their phone into their coat pocket. Karkat turns to face them. “I made this snow testicle myself, I have the fucking right to destroy it.”

Later, when Karkat goes off to sit with Terezi for a bit, you joke with them about fixing the dick behind his back, or maybe making a couple of smaller, more versatile snowdicks. Karkat gives you a questioning look when he comes back and you and Sollux refuse to tell him what you’re both laughing about.

You’re about to make a dumb joke about how he should chill out when a piece of snow hits you in
the chest, soft and exploding on contact. You look up and see that one girl, Nepeta, you think, grinning at you and ducking down behind one of the castle walls. Another snowball comes from behind her, thrown by the big guy, maybe, and it hits Karkat in the side of the head. You’re so busy laughing at his reaction—shock, then anger, then thirst for revenge—that you don’t notice the teams of two that are starting to form around you.

Maybe it’s for the best, because you end up spending the rest of your time in the snow with Karkat by your side. Adrenaline rushing, in a good way, clean and light and with laughter bubbling up in your chest, as you roll up misshapen spheres of snow and duck for cover when there’s two teams ganging up on you on either side.

You lose, both of you, out of breath in the end and thoroughly pummeled with snow. He slumps onto the ground next to you as the others crown Equius and the cat girl the winners, which you don’t disagree with; they make a pretty deadly team.

You head back to Karkat’s place after, because the cold is starting to hurt at this point. Your clothes are soaked and your legs are almost entirely numb, and when you get back inside you and Karkat immediately change into warm pajamas. Karkat is more used to this kind of weather than you are, and even he’s still shivering a little even after changing.

And so you help Karkat make some hot cocoa for the two of you, and it’s cliche and silly but you’ve never gotten to play in the snow and have cocoa after coming in, but it’s as cozy and sweet as you were hoping it’d be.

Outside, the wind picks up and starts to howl.

==> Be Karkat.

If you were snappy at all to the others out in the snow, you don’t really care. There’s been a growing, foreboding pressure in the lower part of your stomach, and waiting for your period to finally come at this point feels like lying down on a railroad while the world’s slowest freight train inches towards you.

You just want it to start so you can get it over with, but for now, all you can do is try to ignore the cramps that are beginning to settle in, and maybe put in an effort to not bite the heads of off people who annoy you. Maybe.

It’s weird having Dave meet all of your friends. He and Sollux get along well enough, you guess, apparently bonding over dick jokes made at your expense, because of course. At one point you just sit and watch him and the others in the snow, content just to see him smiling and laughing, not very content to be freezing your ass off while your uterine lining plans it’s great escape.

Terezi comes up to you then, plopping down in the snow with her dog.

“Hey Karkat,” she says, voice sort of low, and from here you realize the others probably can’t hear you.

“Hey. What’s up?”

She shrugs. “Nothing. Just wanna talk to you.” There’s something on her mind, you can tell. Whether or not she’ll actually say anything is still up in the air. “So…”

“So what?” you ask, picking bits of snow off your gloves.

“There’s…” she starts, then seems to change her mind. “So what’s up with you and Dave?”
You give her a questionable look out of the corner of your eye. “Me and Dave?”

“Yeah. You and Dave. You like him, don’t you?”

Your lungs close up for a second and you try your best to play it cool. “Of course I like him, I wouldn’t be friends with him if I didn’t.”

She lets out a short laugh. “No, like-like him, dummy.”

Across the way, you watch as Dave falls backwards into the snow with Aradia and attempts to make the world’s laziest snow-angel.

You bury your face into your hands, pulling up your knees and hiding behind them, too, for good measure. “Yeah,” you say, voice muffled.

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you,” she says, and you can hear the grin in her voice.

“You know what I fucking said!” You push her in the shoulder, and she just laughs harder.

“Alright, alright, keep your voice down, crabby boy.” You roll your eyes at the nickname; you’re pretty sure at this point she only calls you crabby ironically.

“How did you know I like him?” you ask, voice as low as you can manage.

“Are you fucking kidding me? After all those years of preteen romantic tension and that silly crush you used to have on me? I’m pretty privy to when Karkat Vantas likes someone.”

You sigh, and cover your face again. “Do you have any advice, or are you here just to make fun of me?”

“Seduce him,” she deadpans, and you glare at her. “I mean, take him to the Christmas party I’m throwing in a couple days.”

“Christmas party?” you ask. “Oh yeah, I forgot you and Vriska used to throw those in, like, rotation or whatever.”

“You have to come early and help me set up. I have to make sure that next year she can’t one-up me.”

You scoff. “I thought you guys were friends again.”

“Yeah, well…” she starts, but before she can finish she’s interrupted with a loud bark from her dog. “Come on, let’s go back to playing. Paarthurnax is getting antsy.”

You follow her back out to the snow, dusting snow off the seat of your pants to no avail. After a snowball fight that leaves you soaked and out of breath, you and Dave decide to head back after saying bye to the others.

When night falls, you eat dinner in your room again and watch a couple episodes of The Fresh Prince. Dave helps you hang up the extra rainbow lights in your room, and is nice enough to not even say anything about how you can barely reach them without straining on your tippy toes.

The wind whips around outside, scraping tree branches against the windows and sending what are probably empty garbage bins flying down the street. You don’t think much of it until you’re bringing your plates downstairs after dinner and the lights flicker in the kitchen. Your dad tells you it’ll probably be fine, but makes sure to gather up all the candles in the house, “just in case.”
The lights flicker again as you’re heading back up the stairs, except this time they don’t come back on. You wait, minute after minute, for anything, but the darkness only grows colder.

“Is the power gonna… come back on anytime soon? Or is this just fuckin’ it?” Dave asks, and his voice is both quiet and loud against the silence of the house.

You sigh. Another moment passes in darkness. You offer your response:

“Fuck.”

==> Be Dave.

It’s eerily quiet in the house, no constant rumble of the heater, no TV on downstairs. That one streetlamp out front that usually buzzes a little too loudly is shut off, and not a single car drives down the street outside. Somehow the darkness makes the quiet worse, especially seeing the Christmas tree with none of the lights, ironically coming across as unnatural, and missing the streaks of light that should be let in through the kitchen blinds from the porch light.

You help Karkat carry extra blankets up to his room, tossing the red fuzzy one and two plain throws onto the bed and changing into your pajamas. The wind rattles the screen in the window frame when you undress, and you being left alone in the dark doesn’t help your paranoia when you think for an instant that someone is watching you.

Since it’s relatively late and there’s nothing to do with no power, you both decide to just go to bed. Karkat’s dad says there’s no telling when the power will be on, and gives the two of you another throw blanket when he checks in on you before going to sleep himself. It’s so much colder now than you thought possible, the heater long turned off and the freezing temperatures making their way inside, so you don’t waste any time getting into bed after that.

You scoot closer to Karkat under the blankets, and you can feel his heat, but it’s not enough. The night air is cold against your back, unrelenting, even with the thick comforter piled on with the other blankets. Karkat shivers too, and moves a bit closer.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think the power would go out,” he says, voice low and jaw clenched. You have to clench yours too to keep your teeth from chattering.

“It’s not your fault,” you tell him. “It’s the fuckin’ weather’s fault. I’m probably going to freeze my entire ass off by morning. So thank you, mother nature.”

“Dave, mother nature is literally my fucking nemesis,” he says. “I’m so down with us putting all the blame on her.”

The cold hits you all over again, and you let out a hollow breath. “Shit, man, this is relentless. We have like four blankets, but I’m still too cold to be able to go to sleep, or do anything that isn’t fucking vibrating from how cold this shit is.”

“You mean shivering? But yeah, me too,” he sighs.

You inch closer to him, unconsciously, you think. Anything you can do to seek out heat.

“We could huddle and try to wait it out?” he suggests, and you offer him a short nod in response.

Karkat moves closer to you, so close that at this point the two of you are sharing a pillow. You feel the ghost of his breath on your face and tentatively toss your arm around him. When he wraps his arms around you, warm and secure, that’s just it. You try to move slow, but you cling to him, like
you might die if you don’t get closer, like you’ve been in a desert for years and this embrace is the water you desperately need. Your arm goes behind him, and you touch his hair, just for a moment, hand retreating back to the space behind his shoulders. You hear him swallow, and swallow too, your mouth suddenly so, so dry.

His hand grazes the top of your back, just barely touches the bare skin above the collar of your shirt. You hiss involuntarily, his fingers practically ice.

“Sorry,” he says, moving his hand to your shoulder. “I know my hands are probably fucking freezing.”

“It’s okay,” you murmur.

Neither of you move, and you’re locked into each other in the most perfect way. You tuck your head under his chin and breathe against his neck, and there’s nothing in the world that would be more comfortable than this, right now.

After a while you think maybe you want to move, or have to, but you can’t. You can’t do a single thing to disturb this right now, this perfect, comfortable moment. Your breathing isn’t synchronized, but it’s steady, and the rise and fall of his body lulls you half to sleep.

Karkat’s breathing gets shallow and slow, telling you he’s either asleep or teetering on the edge of unconsciousness. You shift slightly in his arms and he lets out a sigh through his nose and nuzzles the top of your head. Okay yeah, definitely not awake, you think.

And after a long moment, of letting him hold you, of warming up against another human being, of drinking in the closeness, you can’t fight it, and then you’re not awake, either.

==>

Your eyes open up slowly to the early morning light. There’s a warmth beside you, but when you look, Dave isn’t there. You consider rolling over to the spot he left behind, drinking up his scent and the remnants of his body heat, but you probably should figure out where he went.

The lights on your wall are on, you notice, which means the power’s back. Thank fuck, because if anything like that happens again, you’re pretty sure you’ll literally just drop dead.

‘That.’ Right.

You don’t know what possessed you to suggest ‘huddling’ to ‘wait it out’ but it’s kinda hard to dwell on that considering? That Dave? Kind of cuddled the fuck out of you last night?

You hardly slept at all, god, how could you? Dave clung to you all night, and you held him close, drifting in and out of sleep, your skin burning under your clothes where his arms fell around you. With how close his head was to your chest, you’re surprised he didn’t say anything about how hard your heart was beating.

He’s there when you step out into the hallway, having just come out of the bathroom. There’s something off about his expression that you can’t quite place.

“Hey,” he says, then jabs his thumb at the hallway light above him. “Power’s back on.”

“Yeah, I saw,” you tell him. Neither of you move in the hallway, and it’s suffocating. You’re suddenly not sure if you can handle being cooped up inside for much longer. “Hey Dave?”
“What’s up?” he says, tentatively, last night still hanging in the air between you.

“Do you wanna go out into the city today? Hit up museums, or whatever.” You look down at your feet, you can’t help it, because god, that’s like asking him out on a date isn’t it?

“Yeah, sure, dude. Sounds cool,” he says, moving past you before turning around again. “I’ll, uh, get dressed. If you wanna leave kind of early?”

“Yeah, okay,” you nod. “Let me just grab some of my clothes so I can shower.”

He lets you go first back into the bedroom. You make sure to unplug the lights on the wall, then sort out what clothes you’re going to wear for the day. You really hope Dave isn’t looking when you go through the underwear drawer of your dresser and pull out one of your pairs of Period Boxers, which Kanaya helped you make by sewing the crotch of panties into them so you could wear pads without any issue-- you did all the work, shoddy as it is, she just told you what to do. In turn you let her have all your old bras because as luck would have it, you two had the same band size.

When you undress in the bathroom to take your shower, your sweatshirt seems to have a trace of Dave’s scent, a smell you can’t put your finger on but know belongs to him. You bring the fabric up to your nose and inhale, once, and not deeply or anything, you’re not trying to be creepy, you’re-- fuck.

You’re really looking forward to having a distraction today.

==> Be Dave.

The first thought you have upon waking up is that you’ve never been more blissed out and warm in your life, and that you don’t want to move from whatever spot you’re in like, ever. The second thought you have is the realization that even if you did want to move, you literally can’t.

You’re lying on your back, right side flush against Karkat, who has his arm stretched out over your stomach. Before you fell asleep you were listening to the sound of him breathing, but now all you can hear is a deafening static, and it’s getting louder.

Your bro is standing by the door.

As he approaches-- slowly, so slowly, god you just want to get this over with-- Karkat’s arm continues to weigh you down. You know it’s not really the case, you know you could just push yourself up, but you can’t. This is sleep paralysis after all, and your brain is only trying to find an excuse for why you can’t move.

Bro continues to loom over you. He makes his way to the edge of the bed and just… Just stares at you. He’s not even fucking doing anything but you’re so terrified right now, all you want to do is break out of this, make him go away, please make him go away.

You manage to jerk your head to the side, and suddenly it’s all over. The static stops, your bro is nowhere to be seen, but your heart is pounding so hard you’re sure it could break out of your chest cavity like the fucking Kool Aid man.

You’re not really sure where that simile came from, seems kind of inappropriate for the situation. Whatever. You get out of bed and head into the bathroom.

There’s a burning in the back of your throat, like you might throw up, or cry, or both. But you firmly tell yourself that crying isn’t an option right now. You don’t know if you believe in signs or anything, but seeing your bro like that after waking up, after spending the night cuddling with
another boy, after being so vulnerable and pathetic, feels like. Something.

It feels like every emotion you have at once just… falls out of your hollow body, maybe crashing against all the bones and stuff in there on its way out. Numbness washes over you, and your first thought is that you wish you weren’t at Karkat’s house so you could harm yourself and be miserably apathetic in peace.

You sigh, splashing water on your face over the sink, trying to get some semblance of a hold on yourself. You really, really need a distraction today. Anything to not think about what your bro does to you, what he could do to you, what he would do to you, if he knew what you did last night. A paranoid part of you says that he already does know, somehow, because of course he does.

Luckily for you, Karkat suggests heading into the city today.

“Do they let you take pictures in the museums?” you ask him after getting dressed. You’re already planning on bringing your camera, because it’s been too long since you’ve used your trusty Polaroid and you figure the monuments in DC will make for some good photographs. “And are you sure it’s free? That sounds too good to be true.”

“Dave, I’ve been to these fucking museums like twenty times each. So for the last time, yes, they’re free.” He rummages through his backpack until he finds his wallet. “And there’s no rules against photos, so go wild with that thing.”

You point the camera at him, and he shields his face with his hands. “Not that wild, asshole.”

You laugh a little bit, then pack the camera away in your backpack. “What, you don’t want me to take pictures of you anymore?”

“Don’t you already have enough?” he scoffs. “Save it for when there’s actually things of interest to photograph, like the giant phallus that is the Washington Monument, or the Capitol that always has fucking scaffolding on it.”

You ride with Karkat on the metro, freezing your ass off when you transfer at some underground station along the way. It’s busy, much busier than when you last rode the trains, but not so busy that you can’t find anywhere to sit down. Karkat tells you it’s time to get off when you pull up to a stop conveniently called ‘Smithsonian.’

You take the escalators up to ground level, and before you is a wide open space covered in a sheet of snow and several big, old-looking buildings on both sides of you. They’re not tall, though, not like in Houston. In front of you is a square black column that says the name of the station, and in the near distance you see a red, castle-like building surrounded by bare trees.

“So, this is the national mall,” Karkat tells you as you step out onto the walkway in front of the metro.

“What?” you say. “If this is a mall, then where the fuck are the aggressive sunglass vendors? Those shitty cell phone case stands? Where’s Forever 21?”

“Look, I don’t know why the fuck it’s called a mall, okay?” he glares up at you, then turns around. “That’s the Washington Monument, by the way.”

You look where he’s pointing, and much closer than you were expecting stands a massive white obelisk.

“Is that thing supposed to be feel freaky as hell?” you ask, moving down the walkway to stare up at
“Wait till you see it up close,” he says. “It’s ominous as fuck, and you can get vertigo if you look at the top from the base.”

“Isn’t there supposed to be water in front of it?” you ask, lifting your camera from your neck and snapping a shot. You’re pretty sure you got the back of Karkat’s head in that one, but you sort of like that.

“That’s on the other side, by Lincoln. We can walk down there after the museums. If we’re not too tired, I guess.”

“And that castle-lookin’ place?”

“That’s the Smithsonian Castle.”

“Of course, why did I even ask,” you say, laughing a bit. “What’s in there?”

“It’s like a visitor’s center. It’s pretty, I guess, but not really worth wasting your time on.”

You walk further down the walkway bisecting one of the many snow covered fields from the other, each of them probably the size of a football field, not that you have a very good frame of reference for those.

“So where first?” you ask. “To those buildings down there with the orange roofs?”

You point straight ahead, at what looks like a collection of massive buildings built with white brick and peachy orange tiled roofing.

“Congratulations, Dave, you managed to pick out the one thing in our vicinity that isn’t a fucking museum, or even part of the Smithsonian institution at all, in any capacity.”

“They’re not?” you say. “Well, what about that place, with the dome?” Down the walkway perpendicular to you is another large building, this one sporting a modest gold-colored dome.

“That’s the museum of natural history,” he says. “If you’re looking for ‘dino bones’ to chill with like you said you wanted to, that’d be the place to go.”

“When did I say I wanted to chill with dino bones?” you ask him. You turn right where the walkway meets the street, and start walking along the tree lined sidewalk, most of the leaves missing from the branches overhead. “I mean, not that I don’t want to, but…”

“Earlier in the semester? When you were harassing me with shitty music at three in the morning and asking me invasive personal questions?”

“Oh yeah,” you say. “And you said that everything in Maryland was a crab, I remember now. Shit, that was a long time ago, wasn’t it?”

Karkat shrugs. You guess it’s only been a couple months, but it feels longer, like you’ve known him for longer, too. It strikes you that you’ve only known Karkat since the very end of August, and you honestly don’t know how to feel about that.

A wide set of marble steps lead up to the grand entrance of the museum, which is lined with tall Roman columns and bearing banners advertising different exhibits. You follow Karkat up the steps, careful not to slip on the bits of ice here and there. Just as he said, no one charges you when you step
inside, instead a security guard just rummages through both your bags for a total of three seconds before sending you through the metal detectors.

The first thing you see is a giant elephant, stuffed and mounted and placed center stage in the rotunda entrance, the domed ceiling visible high above the circular room. There are several different archways leading to different parts of the museum, and what looks like two whole floors of exhibits. You’re itching to get started.

“Where do you wanna go first?” Karkat asks, and you jump a little, having forgotten his presence for a moment in your excitement.

“Take me to where the dead shit is,” you deadpan, earning a laugh from the other boy.

“If we head that way,” he says, pointing at an area designated the ‘Hall of Mammals.’ “There’s a fuckload of taxidermy animals, like deer and zebras and shit, but in the oceanic section I remember there being sea creatures and other abominations that they have preserved that might be more up your alley.”

“Okay, sea creatures first,” you say. “Uh, if that’s okay with you.”

He grins, like he can’t help it. “Dave, you’re the one who’s never been here before. Whatever you wanna do is fine with me. Explore to your morbid little heart’s content.”

“Alright, cool,” you laugh, and feel your cheeks go a little hot.

You both pack away your gloves and scarves, and you load your camera up with a fresh roll of film before leading the way into the first exhibit.

==> Be Karkat.

You’ve seen this museum more times than you can count on both your hands, and even with the changes in exhibits it was always same old, same old.

But this time it’s different, because you’re with Dave, and you’re watching him experience it for the first time. His eyes light up as you walk by all the different items on display; a glass case full of ancient fossilized invertebrates and plants, an assortment of preserved sea creatures and a massive model of a whale hanging from the ceiling. Dave takes three different pictures of the same coelacanth preserved and on display before moving on to take even more pictures of a tank holding the remains of a giant squid.

You don’t really get it, and to be honest a lot of this stuff kind of turns your stomach to look at, but you can see the delight on Dave’s usually stoic face and that makes it all worth it.

He takes a snap of you looking disgusted next to the giant squid and declares it his favorite picture so far today.

At the end of the ocean hall, there’s a sign to the left for a human originals exhibit. Just from your first glance in there you see a number of skulls and partially assembled skeletons of various hominids.

You can already tell that Dave’s going to be in there for a while.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering grimAuxiliatrix [GA] at 11:49 --

CG: HEY
CG: YOU MEET UP WITH ROSE YET?
GA: No Shes Still On The Bus From New York
GA: Shell be Here In Two Hours Or So
CG: DAVE AND I ARE IN THE CITY RIGHT NOW, IF YOU’RE MEETING HER AT THE STATION WE COULD MEET UP WITH YOU, IF YOU WANT.
GA: Its Alright
GA: I Would Hate To Pull You Away From Your Date
CG: OH, SHUT UP. IT’S NOT A DATE.
GA: Where Are You Two Right Now
CG: AT THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM. DAVE’S GOING AROUND LOOKING AT ALL THIS DEAD SHIT AND IT’S INFURIATINGLY ADORABLE.
GA: I Dont See Whats So Cute About Some Skeletons But I Guess To Each Their Own
CG: NOT THE DEAD SHIT, HIM.

You look up from your phone for a second and see Dave peering over a display case of some kind of partially assembled skull, taking care to read the plaque before moving on.

CG: HE’S LIKE, GENUINELY EXCITED ABOUT THIS. I MEAN, TO THE AVERAGE OBSERVER HE’S JUST WALKING AROUND, BUT I CAN TELL HE’S REALLY INTO IT. CG: HE READS ALL THOSE LITTLE FUCKING BLURBS THEY STICK UNDER EVERYTHING, I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW PEOPLE ACTUALLY PAID ATTENTION TO THOSE.
CG: I GUESS I’M NOT SURPRISED, HE IS STUDYING PALEONTOLOGY. OR IS IT ARCHEOLOGY? I FEEL LIKE HE ALSO MENTIONED ANTHROPOLOGY THOUGH. FUCK, I DON’T KNOW.
CG: POINT IS, I’M JUST SITTING BACK AND LETTING HIM DO HIS THING.
CG: IT’S NICE TO SEE HIM JUST BEING… HAPPY AND RELAXED, I GUESS.
GA: Is That The Plan For The Day
GA: Standing Back And Watching Him Be Cute At Museums
CG: WELL, IT’S STILL SORT OF EARLY.
CG: DEPENDING ON HOW LONG WE’RE HERE, WE MIGHT WALK OVER TO SOME OF THE MONUMENTS AFTER.
CG: NOT THE WHITE HOUSE, THOUGH, WE’LL PROBABLY GO THERE ANOTHER DAY.
CG: WHAT ABOUT YOU?
GA: Hmm
CG: YOU’RE GONNA SHOW ROSE AROUND THE CITY TOO, AREN’T YOU?
GA: Ah Yes
GA: The Classic Pastime Of Showing Your Significant Other The Sights Of Your City
CG: HE IS *NOT* MY SIGNIFICANT OTHER.
GA: Yet
CG: OH FUCK OFF.
CG: CAN’T A COUPLE OF GUYS JUST WALK AROUND A CITY WITH NO ROMANTIC CONTEXT WHATSOEVER?
GA: Should We Go Ice Skating One Of These Days
GA: All Four Of Us I Mean
CG: I DON’T KNOW, I’VE NEVER BEEN VERY GOOD AT THAT.
CG: OH AND ALSO: FUCK YOU FOR TRYING TO SHOEHORN US INTO SOME KIND OF AWKWARD PSEUDO DOUBLE DATE SITUATION.
CG: IT’S NOT HAPPENING.
GA: If I Didnt Know Better Id Think You Werent Actually Harboring Feelings For Him At All
CG: I JUST DON’T WANT THIS TO BE MORE AWKWARD AND PAINFUL THAN IT
HAS TO BE.
CG: HOW FREAKED OUT DO YOU THINK HE’D BE IF HE KNEW I WAS LOW-KEY CRUSHING ON HIM WHILE I WAS HAVING HIM OVER.
GA: “Low Key”
CG: LIKE HOW FUCKING PREDATORY WOULD I SEEM IN THAT SITUATION?
GA: Karkat Youre Not Predatory I Forbid You From Applying That Nasty Trope To Yourself
CG: INVITING HIM TO MY HOME FOR WINTER BREAK UNDER THE GUISE OF OFFERING A SAFE SHELTER, ONLY TO PUT THE MOVES ON HIM ONCE HE CAN’T ESCAPE.
GA: Karkat
CG: KANAYA.
GA: Listen I Know Its Easy To Feel Like A Societal Abomination When It Comes To Relationships With Others Of The Same Gender
GA: Especially Being Trans Like We Are
GA: But I Think Youre Also Just So Keen On Not Accepting That You Did Something Genuinely Nice For Someone
GA: That Youre Trying To Twist The Situation To Paint Yourself As A Bad Guy Instead
CG: I KNOW
CG: I FUCKING KNOW I’M DOING IT AND YET!! HERE I GO!! FUCKING FEELING DISGUSTING ABOUT MYSELF!
GA: Sighs Loudly Im Sitting Here Telling You All Of This
GA: And Yet I Also Feel Similarly To You
GA: Like Im Forcing Rose Into This Or Something
CG: NO, ABSOLUTELY NOT
GA: My Stomach Has Been In Knots All Day And Im Trying To Ignore It By Just Cleaning But Ive Hardly Gotten Anything Done
GA: I Feel Weird About Having Her Over To My House Even Though This Is The Second Time
GA: Maybe Because It Was Mostly My Idea
CG: YOU HOLD THE FUCK ON AND STOP RIGHT THERE WITH THAT NONSENSE
GA: See How Easy It Is To Be On The Other Side
GA: Look We Both Know Were Being Paranoid and Unnecessarily Hard On Ourselves
CG: DEBATABLE.
GA: No Not Debatable
GA: Lets Just Both Agree To Maybe Eat Something And Try To Chill The Fuck Out
CG: UGH
CG: OKAY, YOU’RE RIGHT.
CG: I’LL TALK TO YOU LATER, OKAY?
CG: LET ME KNOW HOW THINGS GO, AND IF YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND ABOUT MEETING UP.
GA: Will Do

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased pestering grimAuxiliatrix [GA] at 12:06 --

You follow Dave around almost every exhibit, looking over skulls and taxidermy, heading upstairs and skipping over the geology section, except for taking a cursory peak at the Hope Diamond. Dave says it’s not anything special, and you laugh and agree, much to the chagrin of some of the people crowded around the spinning glass casing.

You show Dave where there’s human mummies on display, and he gets a funny look on his face when he learns that one is a child. It’s a little morbid, even for him, you guess, so you move on and head to the ground floor to find some food.

Dave navigates carefully around children as you walk through the museum, taking a minute to smile
fondly at a kid screaming about how much he loves tarantulas. You’re used to glaring at every child who bumps into you and screams within earshot, but after watching Dave, you find yourself being a little more tender towards the tiny, loud things.

Right outside the cafeteria is a small stand that you and Dave buy sandwiches and warm drinks from, you sticking with your usual latte and Dave going for a peppermint hot chocolate.

“So, what do you think so far?” you ask him when you sit down.

Dave picks a few of the greens out of his sandwich and tosses them onto the styrofoam plate. “I gotta admit, there’s way more rad shit in here than I thought there’d be. But there being no dino bones on display right now feels like a personal attack.”

You snort as you go to take a drink of your coffee. “I’m sure they had you specifically in mind when they took them down to spend thousands of dollars on a new exhibit.”

There’s a minute you both spend just eating, because it’s around two in the afternoon now and you’re starving. You let Dave get away with taking the tomatoes out of his sandwich but yell at him when he tries to remove more lettuce. He gives you an annoyed look as he takes another bite, but leaves his food be for the rest of the meal.

“The evolution stuff was pretty cool,” Dave says, taking a drink of hot chocolate as he thinks. “But the mummies and shit, I don’t know.”

You take a drink of coffee. “Yeah…”

“The one that was just a kid? Kinda fucked me up,” he says. Dave’s been ripping a paper napkin to shreds in between bites, tossing the smaller and smaller pieces into a big pile on the table.

“You like kids, don’t you?” you ask, looking at him over your coffee.

He shrugs. “Yeah? I guess so? Not more than most people, though, I don’t think.”

“Dave,” you start, exasperation dragging at the edge of your voice. “You had the patience to hold a conversation with an inarticulate three year old in that room with the turtles. I think that says a lot.”

There’s a small smile on his face, and he rips up more of the paper. “Yeah, guess so. I dunno, maybe I have a soft spot for kids.”

“You’d be a good dad,” you tell him, absently as you pick up your sandwich to take a bite. When you look at him again, he’s staring.

“You think so?”

“Yeah,” you say, shrugging. “Sorry, is that weird to say?”

“No, it’s just…” he starts, then lets out a heavy sigh. “Weird. Thinking about parental shit. Because…” he pauses, for a minute or so, and you wonder if he’s just thinking or if he decided not to go through with what he was going to say. “Fuck, you remember when I was talking to Rose the other day?”

“Yeah?” you ask. A bit of food falls off your sandwich, so you set it down on the plate and leave it be.

“Bro is my dad,” he says, and pauses for another long moment. “That’s what got me so messed up.”
“Is that what you meant when you said you ‘found out some shit about him you didn’t want to know’?”

“Yeah.”


“He never told me,” he says. “Not once all those years. Not that it makes much of a difference, or maybe it does? I don’t fuckin’ know.”

“Why wouldn’t he tell you?” you ask, sitting forward in your seat a little.

“No idea,” he rubs at his eyes under his shades. “Guess he wanted me to think of him as my bro instead. Maybe as a cover for his fucked up excuse for parenting? Like, if I knew he was actually my dad maybe I’d question some of that shit more?”

You stare down at the table, picking out patterns in the glossy, speckled surface. “What kind of shit, exactly? Aside from, you know… what happened on Thanksgiving?”

He sighs through his nose and takes a minute to answer. “Well, the sparring was a thing since I was, shit, ten years old probably?”

You’re tempted to interrupt in your shock and disgust, but you think he has a lot to say, so you keep quiet.

“And he didn’t really feed me much at all, except maybe getting too much takeout and handing me the leftovers. Mostly I just walked to the 7 Eleven down the street and bought chips and shit like that every once in awhile. Didn’t always have lunch at school, either, he didn’t really care if I had anything I needed for school, or if I even went half the time.”

“But you graduated high school? And you must’ve done well enough to get into university, too.”

“Yeah, once I got to middle school I was pretty good at dealing with the school shit on my own. I missed pretty much all of eighth grade, though, but I didn’t have to retake anything because my scores were good. Self taught, and all that.” He shrugs.

“Huh,” you say. Dave is talking about this more openly than you anticipated, especially in a public place like this, but from the look on his face he’s not done yet.

“I think when I was really little he did some of the bare minimum stuff, but I remember going to elementary school in dirty clothes every day because there was no one to wash them. I figured out that I could rinse my clothes out in the bathtub, but they didn’t really get all that clean and sometimes I’d end up wearing damp socks and shit to school because I didn’t know what a dryer was.”

“Holy shit, Dave,” your words come out hushed, and your heart tightens up the more you imagine what Dave was like as a small, neglected child.

“I know this shit sounds so fucking out there when I say it out loud, but I swear to god, I thought it was normal. Or funny, like, having functional parents was for boring kids, and that I was cool because my bro cared more about polishing his fucking samurai swords than making sure my shoes still fit me.”

You’re silent for a moment, watching as he tugs at his own hair, wringing silky white locks through tense fingers.
“I guess the one thing that wasn’t so bad is that I could always spot some of his cash. God knows he had enough of it, from whatever the fuck he did on the internet, or when he’d disappear for weeks. I got funny looks from store clerks when I started shopping for myself as a teenager. I guess I always looked younger than I really was. Malnourishment, or whatever the fuck.”

“Fuck, Dave…” you start. “I don’t know what to say, I’m really sorry you went through all of that? That your dad was such a dismal fucking excuse for a human being?”

“Thanks.” He looks up at you and gives you a weary smile. “I know this shit’s kinda heavy, sorry for laying it all on you like this.”

You shake your head. “No, Dave it’s fine. I’m the one who asked, and besides,” you take a minute to try to meet his eyes, but you end up staring squarely in the middle of his chest instead. “I’m your friend, okay? I care about you; you can talk to me about this shit whenever you need to, alright?”

He nods, and fiddles with the shredded napkin again. “I didn’t mean for all that to come out, though. Thanks for listening, I guess.”

“No problem. And look, Dave,” you want to take his hands in yours so fucking badly. “It’s not just me who cares. I know after… that, your childhood, whatever that was--” He lets out a dry laugh. “It can feel like you’ve never been loved, but people do love you. Your friends love you, I love you--”

Jesus FUCK.

“I mean, as a friend, in a friend loving way. We all love you like that.”

“I know,” he says, quietly and with a small smile. “I love you guys too.”

You meet his eyes behind the dark glass of his shades for half a second, and it’s a half second too long.

“So, you done eating, or?”

Dave nods and you both stand up to quickly clean up your mess.

===> Be Dave.

Karkat takes you to another museum after you finish up at the natural history museum, one about space travel and shit like that. It’s a more open space and you take pictures of parts of space shuttles and ancient space suits. As you pass through exhibits talking about the space race and whatnot, you can’t stop thinking about how you spilled all your guts out to Karkat.

He… was nice about it. Understanding, even when you let on to some of the worse stuff. But you feel gross, like your chest has been pried right open. You’ve been getting exponentially more emotional and pathetic in front of him and you really, really need to get a fuckin’ hold on things.

(You don’t need to, why do you keep thinking you need to? Karkat is safe and you trust him, and there’s nothing wrong with any of this. Why can’t you convince yourself of that for more than two minutes at a time?)

After going up to the Washington Monument, the sheer size of it giving you a kind of anxiety you can’t quite explain, you walk with Karkat over to Lincoln. Mostly because you sort of feel like you’re obligated to see this shit, since you’re in this city. The statue of Lincoln makes for a few good pictures, you guess, and the monument from across the pool looks less like a hideous omen.
After that you catch a ride back home on the metro with Karkat’s dad, tired and a bit grumpy after work but still nice enough to ask about your guys’ day. It’s crowded on the train, and the bus too, and getting back to Karkat’s place at the end of an hour or so commute is an immense relief.

You eat dinner with Karkat in his room again, this time just pizza, but like, the kind you pull out of a freezer and cook in the oven. Afterwards you take a long, hot shower and try to wash away some of the stress left over from the day.

Karkat has his laptop open on his stomach on the bed and you lie next to him, too tired to get up and get your own computer. The blankets are tangled up around you, but it’s comfortable to lay on somehow. You curl into the soft fabric of the red blanket you like and put your head next to Karkat’s, who doesn’t seem to mind you peering at what he’s doing on the screen.

He puts on some music by a man with a name you’re not really sure how to pronounce, and it’s that same gentle kind of indie music that you’ve learned he likes. It’s not to your taste, but it’s nice, and fits the mood, you think. The colorful bulbs on the wall warm up the room and the lights stretch out into thin lines under your eyelashes whenever you start to close your eyes.

You doze off for a little bit, letting the music and the sound of Karkat typing every once in awhile fill your ears. Sometimes the heater groans as it tries to heat up the room, and sometimes Karkat lets out a breathy little laugh at something he must’ve seen or read. You keep your eyes closed and just relish in the comfort of the moment, and with nothing else to focus on, you end up focusing on the lyrics to Karkat’s music.

And what you hear makes you feel sort of weird in your chest.

Because you’re pretty sure you’re listening to a man sing about being love with another man. Which is something you’ve never heard before in your life, except maybe as a joke. The words are sweet and tender and you listen curiously to see if maybe you misheard something, and no, he’s literally saying ‘we were in love’ over and over now.

Before this song came on you were thinking about putting your head on Karkat’s shoulder, because it seemed comfortable, and he’s so close. But now you’re too self conscious, and it’s ridiculous, you know it is. You want so badly to be close to people, but shame creeps up your back whenever you go through with it. You don’t want another repeat of the panic you felt this morning, but you don’t want to move away, either. You straddle the line between feeling vehemently that you’re the most pathetic creature to exist, and not caring because you know it’s something that you fucking need.

Maybe it’s not a line, maybes it’s a circle. A cycle. Crave affection and physical closeness, seek it out, feel ashamed, avoid it all together. Rinse and repeat.

You’re pulled away from your thoughts by Karkat’s chest shaking as he laughs at something, and when you look at his screen you see, well, you’re not really sure what you’re looking at. You ask him to explain, and what follows next is him showing you a video that almost makes you throw up from laughing so hard.

“There’s more,” he says after, clicking on a playlist in the suggested section.

“Of the Junker? Please, I don’t know if I can handle more Junker.”

“No, there’s other monsters,” he says. “My favorite is the Mass Effect one, but the Final Pam is really good, too.”

“Jesus,” you say, rubbing at your eyes. “We’re gonna be at this all night, aren’t we?”
“Probably,” he says with a laugh, and hits play on the first one in the list.

In a lull between your video marathon, you tentatively put your chin on his shoulder. He doesn’t seem to react, and you justify it to yourself with the fact that it’s easier to see the screen this way.

You don’t move again until you both decide to finally go to sleep.

…

The next morning, you get a text from your sister asking to meet at the metro to head into the city, so you dress for the cold weather, tying your scarf around your neck and putting on your hat and gloves. Karkat has a black knitted turtleneck on under his coat, and when he looks down his chin tucks under the collar. You think it’s kind of cute.

You make sure to bring your camera, slipping it into its protective case and hanging the strap around your neck. Karkat’s bringing his backpack, and you can’t find any reason to justify bringing your own just for this one thing. It’s not like you’ll be rolling around in the snow like you were the other day, though, so it should be fine.

You meet your sister and Kanaya at the metro, and it’s nice and kind of weird to see Rose again. The last time you saw her was at the end of finals, and the last time you talked to her you… confessed an awful lot, you’re now realizing. She’s wearing that big lavender sweater she’s always got on under a long black coat, and she hugs you tight when she sees you.

The metro ride is pretty uneventful; Rose and Kanaya share a seat and take pictures together and are generally pretty adorable. Karkat sits next to you on the other side of the aisle, wringing and biting his hands and bobbing his knee up and down. At one point you see him take a bottle of pills out of his bag, but you don’t say anything.

Rose and Kanaya hold hands up the escalators at the station, while you and Karkat stand two steps behind and one step away from each other. At the top, though, Karkat leads the way out into the street and towards Dupont Circle, and you gladly join him in front of your sister. Not that the PDA between her isn’t one of the cutest damn things you’ve ever seen, you’d just rather give them their privacy. Definitely doesn’t have anything to do with how them being a couple affects the whole dynamic of your party of four and implies something about you and Karkat tagging along with them.

There’s really not as much snow in the city, but in the center of the traffic circle is a small park coated completely white. Tall, bare trees carrying several inches of snow on their branches stand out against a pale blue sky, and there’s a large, statuesque fountain void of any water in the center. It’s tempting to cut straight through the park, but instead Karkat leads the way around to circle and down P street, and it takes a lot of willpower on your part to not crack a stupid joke.

There’s a second hand and vintage book store on your side of the street, and the other three get distracted for a minute looking at the discounted carts full of books on the street. You flip through a few yourself, seeing nothing but aged textbooks and old magazines. Karkat has to physically pull himself away from them, though, saying more to himself than the others that there’ll be more bookstores once you reach your actual destination.

You continue to walk down the street, past townhouse apartments with restaurants or other businesses on the ground floor, past colonial and modern buildings alike. It’s a longer walk than you were expecting, but the crisp winter air feels nice in your lungs, at least.

At one point, your hand brushes Karkat’s as you walk, a split second of awkward contact between gloved fingers. Then it happens again, so you quickly tuck your hands into your coat pockets.
You all reach a bridge passing over a creek, surrounded on either side by bare trees and passing cars on the highway. On the other side is a residential area, less city and more snow-covered greenery, but after walking down a couple more blocks you finally, Finally end up in what you assume must be Georgetown.

Your first impression of the area is that the people who live here must be very, very rich. Judging by the almost Victorian castle like town homes in between the smaller, but still charming houses lining the street. Being from Texas, it’s a little weird to see these places all crammed together like this, all old brick and colonial, with chipped paint on open window shutters and ancient trees growing up between the sidewalks and in people’s gardens. Most of the houses are strung up with lights, not turned on in the day, of course, and dusted with snow all over.

“Okay, remind me, what street is that cafe you and Rose are going to?” Karkat asks Kanaya when you all stop to wait for a streetlight to change.

“It’s on O street and Wisconsin,” she says. “And I feel like you’re leaving out a lot of information by just calling it a ‘cafe.’”

“Okay, so we’re not that far away,” Karkat says, and the light changes.

“Wait, where are y’all going?” you ask as you cross the street.

“Kanaya made reservations for me and her at a cat cafe,” Rose says, then stops to think, like maybe she was wondering if she should have said ‘her and I’ instead.

“Reservations?” you ask. “Shit must be exclusive, then.”

“It can get fairly packed,” Kanaya says. “But if it’s not too busy you and Karkat might be able to stick around for fifteen minutes or so, I forget what the policy is.”

“What do you say, Karkat?” you ask, shrugging with your hands still in your pockets. “We gonna chill with some cats for a bit?”

“I mean, I’m mildly allergic to them and not very fond of small, skittish creatures with tiny knives on their hands. But sure, if you want to ‘chill’ with them then we can.” You reach the end of another short block, and Karkat punches the button on the crosswalk. “Kinda the whole point of going to DC and shit,” he mumbles.

“Huh?”

He stares down at his feet. “Doing the things you want to do, since you’re the tourist here.”

Behind you, Rose and Kanaya huddle together closer in the cold. You don’t think they’ve let go of each other’s hands since stepping off the metro.

“Dude, let’s just do whatever’s fun,” you shrug. “Whatever we both want to do. Like, balance it and shit.”

“Fine,” he huffs. “But, for the record, I’m fine with just sightseeing and showing you around and shit like that.” He looks down the snowy street, and you follow his gaze. “It’s nice seeing the city in winter.”

“Don’t spend too much time out in the cold, though,” Kanaya says. “Also don’t be afraid to follow mine and Rose’s example.” Rose snuggles closer to the taller girl, and before you can sputter out a reply, the light changes.
You walk behind the other three and your face goes hot at the idea of sapping Karkat’s warmth like you did the night before last, and somehow you find yourself wondering if Rose and Kanaya know.

After passing a few more especially festive houses, you come up onto a street lined with shops. Past an old looking 7 Eleven and down a street with a trolley track down the center of it, is a modest little building painted white and with several cats napping in the front window. Kanaya holds the door open for Rose, and you and Karkat head inside after them, mostly out of curiosity.

It’s small inside, but cozy, with fairy lights and fluffy blankets, beanbags and floor cushions, all on the same level as the cats that wander the space. The place is crowded, unfortunately, so it doesn’t come as a surprise when, after Rose and Kanaya sign in and order two cups of tea, the greeter says you’ll have to wait until the next time slot if you want in.

“Sorry,” Kanaya says, turning to the two of you. Rose is on the other side of the cat gate, in cat heaven, where she’s soon to be joined by her girlfriend. She ignoring you, but you gotta admit it’s pretty damn cute. “I thought maybe we could slip you in, I should’ve thought about that when we made the reservations.”

“What, no, it’s fine. We’ll let you two have your date,” Karkat says. “Text me when you want to meet up again.”

“Of course,” Kanaya says, dipping her head. “And we’ll let you have yours.”

It takes a second for what she just said to register in your brain. Karkat’s glaring daggers at her, and the air is suddenly thick with tension. You just stand there awkwardly, because you’re not sure what’s got Karkat so angry. She was joking, right? You’re pretty sure that was a joke.

A few seconds go by, and with each passing one you become less sure of yourself.

“I’m joking,” she adds, and the mood deflates a little.

You and Karkat get the chance to scritch one (1) kitty’s head before leaving the cafe, a large, fat calico that had chosen the checkout counter as its napping spot.

Back outside, Karkat convinces you to keep walking down O Street, which so far has only been several blocks of rich people’s townhouses and a Catholic preschool.

“How much further this way?” you ask. There’s no traffic or stoplights down this way, and you and Karkat end up jaywalking more often than not. “You sure you’re not lost?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s down this way,” he says, pulling out his phone. “Yeah, we just walk down this street, it’s only a couple more blocks.”

“What is?” you ask, waving at a car when Karkat wanders onto the crosswalk and cuts the driver off. “What are we looking for, exactly?”

Karkat stops short at the other side of the street. “That.” You look where he’s pointing.

In the distance you can make out the large spire of a cathedral, grey and sharp against the soft sky. “That?”

“Dave,” Karkat says, putting away his phone. “No way we’re not gonna treat ourselves to an unsupervised tour of the rich kid’s private catholic university while we’re here.”

“University?” you ask, because the closer you get, the more the place that Karkat’s leading you to
looks like an ancient house of worship.

You walk with him over to the snowy campus, pulling out your camera and pointing it up at the towering building before you. It really is unlike anything you’ve seen in person before; you don’t think you’ll ever get over just how old some of the shit is over on the east coast.

After a couple shots of the spires against the winter sky, you turn around and snap a picture of Karkat, partly because it is, to be honest, kind of fun to mess with him, but mostly because candid shots are your favorite. Especially of him.

But when you lower the camera from your face after the flash goes off, you think that maybe he doesn’t look so good.

=> Be Karkat.

You watch Dave take pictures of the cathedral for a few minutes, inconspicuously leaning against the base of a nearby statue. A wave of dizziness washes over you, so you squeeze your eyes shut and try to let it pass.

The first anxiety attack you had today was in the shower, early in the morning while coffee brewed downstairs and Dave ate cereal as he waited for his turn in the bathroom. The water going down the drain stained red when you washed around your crotch and sure enough, when you felt down there, it was kind of a bloody mess. Whatever. At least you didn’t get it while out in the city. This is probably the best case scenario.

That doesn’t stop you from panicking, though, because you know from experience that your period can worsen your regular, general feelings of anxiety, and thinking about that makes you anxious in the moment, and will probably make you even more anxious later today. You aren’t just going in circles of anxiety, you’re running wildly on the surface of an anxiety sphere. So you take half of a Xanax when you get out of the shower.

The second anxiety attack you have is when you’re on the metro, because the ride to Dupont Circle is way longer than you remember it being, and a horrible cramp settles in your gut while the train is still moving. Your heart beats fast as people get on, crowding the space by the door. It’s quiet in the car, and if you decided to open your mouth to ask to get off, everyone would hear, and Dave and Rose and Kanaya would look at you funny, and you’d delay the whole trip, and--

You unzip the backpack you brought with you and pull out a water bottle, fishing through loose pads and tampons and a sports bra you packed in case you need to change out of your binder, until you find a bottle of pills that isn’t the Midol you threw in there when Dave wasn’t looking. He quirks a brow at you as you pop the lid off, but doesn’t say anything.

The intention was to take the other half of the pill you broke this morning, but your fingers are shaking, and you don’t want people to look at you as you struggle to take a pill out of a mostly full bottle, because they’ll think you’re weird and wonder just what the fuck it is you’re doing and if you’re just dumb and why can’t you just do this one thing, you’re getting off track. Okay. You couldn’t get the half pill out, and you didn’t think to just break another one, so you took a full one instead. Which is probably fine. You think it’ll be fine.

You hope it’ll be fine.

In the city you feel a little better, walking outside in the cold air, stopping to look over some used books on display, navigating your way to Georgetown. It helps to have something to think about other than your cramps or if you’re leaking or if your anxiety is going to spike up again. Your hand
bruses against Dave’s twice, but instead of freaking out, you sort of think it’s funny, in a way.

No amount of anti-anxiety meds can, however, stop you from giving Kanaya a look of death when she outright calls what you and Dave are doing a ‘date,’ because it’s not you’re just hanging out as friends and saying anything else will only serve to make shit awkward, not get him to magically return your feelings. No matter how much you wish that would happen.

After the cat cafe, while leading the way to the university (not a difficult feat, you literally just had to keep walking down the street) you nearly walk into traffic crossing the street. Dave doesn’t say anything, nor does he seem notice anything off about you, but once you wake it to the courtyard of the campus, you apparently can’t hide it anymore.

Dave’s face goes slack when he lowers the camera from his face. “You alright, bro?”

Your head feels cloudy, and you end up slurring your response. “Yeah, ‘m alright.” The muscles in your arms and shoulders are loose, and god, when was the last time you were out and about without having some kind of tension there?

He gives you a curious look, raising one of his brows at you and tilting his head. He has really, really nice eyebrows, thick and dark, always betraying more expression than any other feature on his face.

“Karkat?” he takes a step towards you. There’s concern in his voice, and it strikes you as odd that such a beautiful human, with such a kind soul and heart, exists in your life, and is here, wondering if you’re okay, considering you at all in any way, you, a lesser being--

“Karkat!”

You blink a few times, startled thoroughly out of your self deprecating tangent, then try pushing yourself up so you’re not relying on the concrete base of the statue to hold your weight so much. You’re still dizzy, but you manage to stand alright, sort of.

“Sorry,” you say. He has a crease in his brow as he looks you over, and it’s not fair, because that’s usually your look, and worrying is usually your job. “I’m fine, just kind of out of it.”

“Out of it?”

You breathe a heavy sigh, then mumble, “Might’ve fucked up my meds.”

“You talkin’ about what you took when we were on the metro? What was that?”

“Also I’m bleeding.”

He takes you by the shoulders and sits you down on a nearby bench, dusting off the snow beforehand. What a gentleman. “What do you mean you’re bleeding?” he says, sitting down next to you. “Where?”

“My ass,” you say, and the look he gives you makes you wheeze with laughter, but that only makes him look more worried. “Dave, I’m fine, I promise. I just have my period, please don’t worry.” You reach out and cup his face, squishing his cheek just a bit. He looks so confused. Wow, it’s warm. Why are you wearing gloves when you could just put your hands on Dave’s face?

He slowly removes your hand and places it back into your lap. “Does being on your period usually make you act like you are fully, and truly, fucking blunted?”

You snort, and you think he laughs a little bit, too. “No, Dave, I-- fuck.” A sigh escapes your lips,
and you rub at your forehead. “I took a higher dose of my anxiety meds than what would probably be fucking advisable, and it’s kind of all hitting at once.”

He lets out air through pursed lips. “Okay, you gonna be alright?”

You nod. “Yeah, I’ll seem vaguely sober soon, or sober adjacent. Just give me a sec.”

He pats you on the shoulder. “You wanna go inside and warm up a bit? I don’t know about you, but my ass is frozen fuckin’ solid right now.”

You nod again and let him pull you up from the bench, then walk with him inside the grand building before you. Inside it’s not especially impressive, but it’s warm enough, so you walk around a bit before passing through to the courtyard on the other side.

The courtyard is encircled with a number of trees and dusted with snow, and right across from you is a small chapel. To be honest, you’ve never really been one for just walking around and looking at things, and you’re not sure if you’re doing this right, or if Dave is even having fun.

The flash of his camera goes off, and he grins when you realize that he just took another picture of you.

You just roll your eyes and continue leading the way, but it’s also kind of hard to be annoyed when his smile is so nice to look at. As you’re stepping inside the chapel-- mostly empty, covered in poinsettias, and intensely quiet-- you mentally berate yourself because that was honestly one of the gayest thoughts you’ve had in awhile.

You both stand there for a moment, taking in the quiet, maybe earning a couple looks from people wondering what you’re doing in here. Neither of you are one for religion, you’re really just wandering for the sake of wandering at this point. You take a couple steps, and he follows, and again your hands brush. An instant of charged contact, soft but electric, even through the gloves you both have on.

“Hey, man, if you wanna hold my hand, just say so.”

You quickly jerk your hand away.

“Fuck you,” you say, and it’s too loud, you’re always too loud. Someone glares at you, so you quickly leave the way you came. He follows, grinning, because it’s just a joke to him, will only ever be a joke, and you don’t know how someone you like so much can also be so fucking infuriating sometimes.

On the walk from the campus to the main streets of the neighborhood you try your best to cool down. You’re thoroughly done with the sightseeing bullshit at this point and really need a goddamn cup of strong, relatively cheap coffee, so you send Kanaya a text and say that you and Dave will be at the Peet’s Coffee on M street.

You walk in silence for a couple of blocks, which is good, because you’re still blistering at this point and you don’t want to talk just yet. Dave most likely gets the hint that you’re embarrassed and pissed off because, well, yeah, you are. But not for the reason he thinks, which is that you didn’t want to accidentally hold hands with your guy friend, but rather that you did.

You definitely did.

You check your phone a couple of times to make sure you’re heading in the right direction, turning around when you find a dead end at the end of a short street that was supposed to go through, and
then trying to cut through an alleyway only to find a set of precarious steps instead.

“F*ck, these are some steep ass stairs,” Dave says, peering down at the steps. “Kinda fuckin’ stairs you gotta be warned about, bro.”

You ignore his attempt at referencing his own webcomic, looking over the precarious steps yourself. “Dave, I’m like seventy percent sure those are the fucking Exorcist stairs, and I don’t want to die trying to go down them.”

“What? Dude, come on, it’ll be fine,” he says, and takes a step forward.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” you say, and stomp your foot down into a pile of snow on the sidewalk. “There’s fucking ice and snow everywhere, including on those steps, so no, it will not be fine.” You huff and turn around. “We’re going to go down one block to walk down a normal street, like normal people. Come on.”

Dave sighs and mumbles something sarcastically about how it’s so sweet that you’re looking out for him, that probably does have an undertone of sincerity, and it takes a great deal of strength not to lash out. The high you were feeling earlier is definitely starting to fade now, with anxiety edging in and manifesting as irritability. Or maybe that’s just the whole menstruating thing, you don’t fucking know.

You walk past a block of nearly identical storefronts and cross the street over to the coffee shop you’ve been looking for. Your mood gets a little better when you have a cup of too-sweet mocha in your hands, Dave drinking a cup of hot black tea you insisted on paying for. Kanaya texts you back saying she and Rose will meet up with you soon, and so you wait together in the warmth of the indoors.

After they get there, you and Dave wander around with them for a bit, dipping into shops and coming out with chocolates or macarons, walking past storefronts displaying clothes more expensive than everything you own combined. The girls head into one of those fancy soap stores and you have to wait outside because all the scents send you into a sensory overload. After a few minutes, Dave comes out to wait with you, too, probably suffering the same fate.

Rose carries a couple shopping bags that she refuses to reveal the contents of, telling the two of you that they’re gifts she was kind enough to buy for you since you’re celebrating that ‘godawful holiday’ and when you get back to the metro station you force her to accept your offer of filling up her metrocard.

You’re absolutely exhausted on the ride home, from the walking, the medication, your period, all of it. There might’ve been a point where you dozed off, you’re not sure, and you’re really glad that Dave doesn’t say anything when you end up leaning on him for most of the commute back home.

After such a long day, it still seems so soon when you’re parting from Rose and Kanaya, but also not soon enough. For the most part, this whole ‘double date’ thing went sort of okay, and you don’t want to risk it by prolonging it unnecessarily. But when Dave hugs his sister goodbye, you kind of wish you had been out longer just so they could spend some more time together.

God, you’re such a fucking sap.

…

Terezi invites you and Dave over mid-morning the next day to help set up for her party. On her request, you both wear holiday-themed sweaters. Yours being an extremely garish but beloved bright
green pullover featuring the Fresh Prince of Bel Air wearing a Santa hat, and his being a red pullover with white cross-stitch snowflakes and lettering that reads ‘DAD’ taken straight from your father’s closet.

Okay, so the two of you aren’t going to be the most fashionable people at the party, but who cares. Dave spends ten minutes trying to hold a straight face long enough in the bathroom mirror to take a selfie for his snapchat story. When you comment that the ‘DAD’ part will show up backwards in the picture, he just says that makes it better.

You lead the way over to Terezi’s place, snow crunching underfoot as you cut through a small field to get to her side of the neighborhood. Her dog greets you both before she does, jumping up wildly and then running off before returning to present Dave with a slobbery tennis ball.

“Aw, he loves you,” Terezi says, pushing the front door closed with her cane. When the dog refuses to actually let go of the ball, Dave just gives him scritches under the ear and plants a kiss on the top of his head. And you’re pretty sure you’re actually dying a little bit from how fucking cute that was.

Before you can die too much, though, you hear a voice come from down the hall.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” you sputter, because that was not what you were expecting to hear at all, and because Dave ‘rubbing off’ on you sounds weirdly sexual from the way she says it.
“You said fuckin’ instead of fucking. You usually enunciate your fucks, if I remember.”

“Enunciate this,” you say, and just as you hold up your middle finger, Terezi stands in between the two of you.

“Okay, okay, let’s just move along to decorating and baking cookies. Quit fighting like little kids.”

Vriska rolls her eyes, playfully, as she lets herself be dragged upstairs into the main living space and away from the entryway you’ve all been crowding.

Terezi’s place has a more open floorplan than yours, with a kitchen fully visible from the large living room and a modern freestanding fireplace with mismatched papasan chairs on either side of it. One time you both piled into one of those things when you had a crush on her, and you were pretty sure your heart was going to beat out of your thirteen year old chest.

There’s Christmas music playing from the big speakers by the TV set up, and aside from that and the large, lit up tree in the corner, there doesn’t seem to be much set up for the party so far. You know from experience, both from being dragged into prepping for your friends’ parties and attending them, that the rest of the day is probably going to be spent cutting up snowflakes and hanging decorations on the walls. Maybe if you’re lucky, you and Dave will be let into the kitchen to help frost cookies and sample unbaked batter.

“Bro,” Dave murmurs, standing next to you in the living room. “You didn’t tell me Terezi was rich.”

“Her mom’s a fucking lawyer,” you tell him. “Of course she’s loaded.”

The music switches from an upbeat number to a ballad about Jesus, and you wonder if the girls just set up a music stream instead of hand picking the music themselves. Dave quirks his eyebrow at you as a man starts singing about a child to be born, with outdated and racist terminology thrown in the lyrics, and you hope the expression you give him conveys how dead you are inside at that moment.

“Dave!” Terezi calls from over in the kitchen. “You’re tall, right?”

He shrugs. “Yeah, I guess. Why?”

You roll your eyes and make sure your scoff is audible. ‘I guess’ says the fucker who’s more than a foot taller than you.

Terezi walks over carrying a plastic bag, leaving Vriska to take care of the cookie sheets ready to be put in the oven.

Inside the bag are a number of plastic leafy twigs, tied in red ribbon and with small white berries hanging off of them. “Can you hang these up all over? Thanks.” She hands him the bag and goes back to help Vriska.

“You mean these?” Dave asks, holding one up in front of his face.

“Those are mistletoe,” you say, hiding your reddening face in your hands. ‘So this is the kind of party Terezi’s planning on having?"

“Huh,” Dave says, holding it up higher. Above the two of you. “So where should we hang these at?”

He doesn’t even know he’s doing it. Over the speakers, a Marvin Gaye song starts to play.
You’re ninety percent sure that you’re going to be dead by the end of the night.

==> Be Dave.

You unironically really fucking love that your ‘ugly Christmas sweater’ was taken from a forty year old’s closet and says ‘DAD’ across the chest. It’s probably the best thing ever, with Karkat’s incredible Fresh Prince sweater just barely being the runner up.

Prepping for the party consists mostly of dealing with the burden of hanging things up, you being the tallest in the room, of course. You and Karkat try cutting out snowflakes as per Vriska’s direction, but they come out incredibly shitty and with vaguely phallic designs, so you get banned from snowflake duty.

After that you end up wrapping a shit ton of presents, generic white elephant kinds of gifts, like gift cards and candy and coffee mugs. It takes a while to get the hang of the process, and your first few gifts looks like shit, but so do Karkat’s, so you don’t feel so bad.

One by one, other people start to show up, just as the early winter evening is settling in outside. Most of them are people you recognize from the other day in the snow, but a couple are people you assume are friends from work or college. Even though you know some of these people, you still end up hanging out in the corner with Terezi’s dog anyways.

You’re emphatically trying to explain to him why he can’t have any of your chocolate peppermint bark when Sollux comes up to you, giving you sort of an odd look as you attempt to hold a conversation with a dog.

“Not much of a party guy either, huh?” he says. You note a small charm hanging from his neck that says ‘he,’ which is different from the ‘they’ you heard everyone using for him the other day, but you don’t mention it.

“Nah, not really,” you tell him. Over where everyone else is, you see Karkat talking in a circle of three other people. “Karkat seems to be having fun, though.”

There’s a clamor across the room, and you see people crowding around two girls-- Aradia and Feferi, you think-- under one of the mistletoe branches you hung up earlier, kissing each other as the crowd chants and cheers them on.

“Damn, they uh, really are taking those things seriously at this party, huh?” you say.

“Oh, yeah, shit gets intense some years,” he says, then looks around behind the two of you. “There’s not one over here, don’t worry.”

“I hung those fuckin’ things up, I know where they are,” you tell him. For some reason the relief in his voice makes you feel a certain way. Insulted? No, more like…

Well, you guess you wouldn’t really mind kissing him if people were pressuring you to do so. Or anyone else you were caught under the mistletoe with. You’ve never kissed anyone before, but the idea of it seems nice. Exciting, even. Especially seeing what it’d be like kissing a boy.

You--

That that comes and goes without you immediately feeling like it’s wrong, or pushing it away, and the fact that you didn’t jump straight (heh) to ‘no, no, no’ surprises you more than the thought itself.

It’s just… a thought after all, right?
You end up following Karkat around the party when sitting in the corner gets a little boring. He’s a lot more sociable than you, you’re noticing, and he picks up the slack when you’re too awkward to hold a proper conversation.

That’s all the party really is, just sitting back while people talk, listening to the nonstop Christmas music over the speakers, eating way too many of the cookies and sweets set out on the dining table. There’s a couple more instances where everyone stops to pressure two unsuspecting party goers into kissing, but you don’t really think much about it, until there’s a lull in the party while you’re standing next to Karkat and trying to talk with some of his friends.

“Mistletoe!” someone calls out, and after a few seconds of looking around, you realize everyone is looking at you.

You and uh, you and Karkat.

Who looks completely horrified, by the way. He has the lower part of his face hidden in his hands and a bright blush all the way up to his ears. You look over at him, but he refuses to meet your gaze.

He doesn’t want to kiss you.

You laugh awkwardly as everyone stares. “Come on guys, let’s, uh, not… I don’t think Karkat wants to…”

“You gotta kiss,” someone says, and you’re mildly surprised when you realize it’s Terezi. “Those are the rules of mistletoe.”

You look over at Karkat, who takes one of the hands from his face and puts it in his mouth, biting down like you’ve seen him do when he’s really anxious.

“How about a kiss on the cheek?” you offer. Karkat glances at you and nods slowly, removing his hands from his face. You’re surprised he heard you with how loud the party seems right now.

And then you sort of just… lean down and mash your lips against his cheek, for the duration of one entire second. This seems to do it, though, because the others cheer and then go back to the party, leaving you to die of awkwardness on your lonesome.

It was over faster than you thought possible, just the most brief spark of contact, but there’s a tingling sensation left on your lips for the rest of the night.

===> Be Karkat.

You try to get a private conversation in with Terezi before people start showing up to the party, but she’s dodging you, you know she is. For whatever reason, she doesn’t want to talk about how she’s apparently dating Vriska now. You want to tell her she can trust you, that you won’t judge her and that she doesn’t have to feel bad. It’s less about feeling entitled to know about her personal life and more about your shortcomings as a friend, as someone she can trust. It hangs over your head the whole day, but all you can do is give her space and try to occupy your thoughts with the party instead.

You say hi to Sollux, who's wearing his pronoun necklace flipped to say ‘he’ this time. Last summer you had asked him about it, and when he told you he was bigender you were only a little bit surprised. (The ‘bi’ thing, what is it with him and the number two?)

You say hi to your other friends, too, spending most of the night catching up with them. It’s nice seeing them again; you forgot just how much you missed seeing their faces on a regular basis.
It’s when you’re having a good time and minding your own fucking business when suddenly everyone is looking at you, and to your utter horror, it’s because you and Dave got caught under the mistletoe.

You can’t help the blood rushing to your face, or hiding behind your hands, because now’s the time where he says outright that he’s not, and never will be, into you that way. And even if he doesn’t say it, even if by some miracle he does kiss you, this isn’t the way you want it to happen. In front of everyone, under pressure. You might actually, literally fucking throw up.

“I don’t think Karkat wants to…” Dave says, and you’re pretty sure you can feel your soul leaving your body.

_He thinks you don’t want to kiss him._

When it’s over and done with, you look for an excuse to get away from the party. Your cheek is burning where Dave kissed you, and you desperately need to stop thinking about how soft his lips were, how gentle he was, how-- fuck. Out on the balcony you see Sollux smoking, and you step out into the freezing air without a second thought.

“Give me one,” you demand. He eyes you for a second before complying, holding his lighter up to the cigarette when you place it in your mouth.

The first inhale is painful, it being at least three months since you’ve employed this particular unhealthy coping mechanism.

“You really that stressed out just from a kiss on the cheek?”

You glare at him. “It’s not that.” You take another puff, easier this time. “Not… just that.”

“You wanted to kiss him on the mouth?” he teases, and you don’t answer when he waits for your response. “Holy shit, you’re like in love with that guy, aren’t you?”

“Shut up!” you hiss, but he just laughs.

“You gotta stop falling for your friends, dude.”

You hang your head, taking in another breath of wispy smoke. “Yeah, I fucking know.”

When the night starts to grow late, you doze off by the fire curled up in one of the chairs, which Dave fucking gets into with you when the other one is occupied by Terezi and Vriska, and it’s a level of closeness that you’re not sure you can deal with after everything today. It strikes you then that Dave is actually an incredibly clingy person, or cuddly, that’s probably a better word. It can be nice, when you’re not internally having a crisis about liking him.

You try to tell Terezi that you’re tired and gonna head home soon, but she tells you just to sleep over. There’s a lot you still want to talk to her about, but that offer helps you feel a little less like she secretly hates you, and when you’re taking your binder off in the bathroom (after being prodded by Dave to do so) you feel a little bit silly about worrying so much about your friendship with her earlier.

Even with how tired you are, you find yourself lying awake on one of the couches in the living room, Dave fast asleep on the other. All the lights are off, save for the cozy lights wrapped around the tree, and it’s quiet and warm, but you can’t sleep.

You touch the spot where Dave kissed you with your fingertips, and you swear you can still feel his
lips.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

hey sorry about the wait. depression and shit yknow how it is

warnings for discussion of child abuse and self harm

==> Be Karkat.

Christmas morning is as uneventful and humble as the years before. Everything is just slightly off, though, with Dave being there. You wake up early with him and tear into the presents Rose left you and what you brought home from Terezi’s white elephant, plus a few poorly wrapped things left under the tree by your dad.

The gift from Rose is wrapped in crisp white paper with a glittery design that falls off everywhere if you so much as look at it. The tape in the back is haphazard and suggests a lack of hindsight on how much paper it’d take to comfortably cover the present underneath. Not that you’re one to be uppity about your gift’s presentation; it’s honestly better than anything you’ve ever tried to wrap.

When you unwrap it you have a small leather bound book in your hands, but not real leather, at least you don’t think so. It’s a deep red color, with an embossed design around the border, and when you open it, the pages are blank. Thick, off-white paper with thin lines; a writing journal. It’s almost too pretty to even think about using it, but knowing Rose, you think that she’d rather you wreck this thing instead of leaving it to collect dust on your bookshelf.

You hear Dave whisper “holy fuck” as he opens his gift, a small box that looked to be wrapped by the store clerk who sold it. Inside is an expensive looking camera, the kind with the big round lense on the front. Judging by Dave’s reaction, it’s a pretty good one, but you don’t really know enough about photography to be sure.

The presents from your dad are practical-- another binder from gc2b to add to your collection, obligatory socks, and a new pair of headphones to replace the pair with the wonky cord that you’ve been complaining about for a while. Dave looks embarrassed when he sees a gift addressed to him and opens it to find a new pair of shoes. Which, yeah, your dad most likely saw the ratty old converse by the door and saw fit to replace them. They’re nearly the same, black instead of red, probably a size bigger and almost supernaturally clean in contrast. Dave tries them on and stutters out a “thank you” and something about how your dad didn’t need to get him a gift, but your dad just waves him off.

You spend the rest of the day lazing around in the basement, surrounded by tin foil chocolate wrappers and still in your pajamas. When the morning cartoons stop being nostalgic and give way to a marathon of a poorly animated slapstick show, you boot up your old Gamecube and spend hours playing through your collection of games. One of them is a glitchy shooter that seems to be working against you, specifically, between switching the functions of your control sticks to making it so you can only move backwards or look straight up at the sky. But instead of getting mad whenever Dave inevitably wins, you find yourself laughing to the point of tears. You spent probably three hours in total screaming at that game, but you had a smile on your face the entire time.
There is a lot more of lazing around in the subsequent days, the exhaustion of college having finally caught up with you. The overwhelming sense of domesticity is left unsaid; you don’t talk about how you both go to bed at around one in the morning every night, side by side in the same bed, or how you eat every meal together. It’s incredibly intimate, and with your tender, pining heart you find it hard to discern whether you’re happy about this entire situation, or if it’s all the more romantically frustrating.

You go back into the city again, on a weekday when it’s quiet. Dave’s been itching to use his new camera and you have a nagging obligation to show him the White House for some reason, plus being out in the fresh air is a nice change from playing video games in the basement.

The trip is an easygoing one, at least compared to the last. You get hot drinks in little paper cups from a cafe to try to fend off the cold, stop to take shitty selfies in front of Obama’s front lawn, and utterly fail to properly appreciate any of the historical landmarks you come across. After a few hours, though, you’ve both had enough of the nearly freezing temperatures and get back on the metro, sharing a bright orange seat in the midst of the mid-afternoon crowd.

The next morning your dad wakes you up at five thirty (and you, quite justifiably, practically tear your door open and and almost snarl in his face) to tell you that you have an appointment with your endocrinologist at eight.

You resist telling him to go fuck himself when he leaves for work right after, because you do actually really need to see that doctor if you ever want to go on hormones again. But it not slipping his mind that he made the appointment for you for the past week in a half would’ve been nice. You’re too mad to go back to bed and get a little bit more sleep, so you head downstairs for coffee, fuming all the way.

Dave doesn’t wake up when you do, which you’re really thankful for. Being woken up by anything that isn’t your own alarm or natural circadian rhythm always turns you into just the most irritated kind of asshole, and you’d rather not subject him to that.

Instead, you down a cup of coffee, watching melted snow drip down the icicles hanging over the back patio. It’s been slowly getting warmer since that initial snowstorm, but overnight everything re-freezes, exponentially making the outdoors an icy, slushy nightmare.

You head back up to your room to grab your clothes for the day, the sound of the door opening having apparently startled Dave out of sleep.

“Sorry,” you murmur, finding one of your binders in your dresser. “I have to get ready for a fucking doctor appointment. You can go back to sleep if you want.”

He sits up a little, rubbing at sleepy eyes. “Doctor appointment?” he asks. “When?”

“At eight, it’s almost six now.” You pause as you take out one of your old black tee shirts. “You don’t have to come.”

“Dude,” he yawns. “Not to diss your house or anything, but staying here all by myself for the entire morning sounds like all sorts of fuckin’ boring.”

You smile for a second, but quickly hide it. “And tagging along with me to an appointment doesn’t?”

“Nah, not really,” he says, scooting off the bed and placing his shades over his face. You hang onto something in his words as a tight feeling settles over your chest, and it’s not until you leave the room that you really process it.
Oh. He actually likes spending time with you.

You tell Dave to go eat, and then shower and dress quickly, stopping by your room to throw on a grey pullover before heading downstairs. Dave is sitting at the dining table with a bowl of cereal, and looks up from browsing his phone when you walk in.

“Uh, is it cool that I--” he gestures to the food.

“Dave, I literally fucking told you to go eat breakfast while I showered.”

“Yeah, but…” Dave stiffens a bit, and you have to force yourself to swallow down your residual anger. You’re not mad at him, you’re mad at how early it is.

“Dave, I promise that you are not inconveniencing or pissing off anyone by helping yourself to whatever garbage food you find in this house.” That gets a small smile out of him, and you see him go back to eating before you turn away to pour yourself another cup of coffee.

At seven thirty you head out to the bus stop, bundled up in your coats and wearing your hats and gloves to try to fend off the freezing morning temperatures. You jaywalk across the street when the traffic slows so that when the bus comes you’ll be headed into town instead of towards the metro, and you watch coldly as a bus stops on the side of the street you were just on and leaves without you.

When the right bus comes, you and Dave get on and sit near the heater for the fifteen minute ride. You get off the bus right off of main street, where you have to punch buttons on every crosswalk you come across, the busy morning traffic slowing down your walk to the doctor’s office to the point where you anxiously check the time on your phone with each passing minute.

“So what’s this appointment for, anyway?” Dave asks as you walk.

“It’s just another bullshit stepping stone to getting back on hormones again,” you tell him, cursing under your breath when your feet sink into the slush on the sidewalk. “Well, this one is actually sort of important, but it shouldn’t take long.”

You reach the building five minutes before your appointment, quickly stepping inside and taking an elevator up to the third floor. Dave drags his feet behind you as you lead the way, only questioning once if you actually know where you’re supposed to go. You tell him that at one time you were coming here every two weeks, and that the path to the office is practically ingrained in your muscle memory at this point.

The waiting room has a smothering silence hidden underneath the faint music playing from a radio somewhere. You sign in, scratching down your legal name with a heavy hand (with your actual name written in parentheses next to it) while Dave goes to sit down on one of the white pleather seats. A woman behind the reception desk quirks an eyebrow at you, but doesn’t say anything, so you go to take a seat next to him.

Dave pulls out his phone, calmly scrolling through one of his apps, while you fidget in your chair, the quiet, sterile atmosphere of the room making your skin crawl. You dig your fingernails deep into your palms, curl your toes in your shoes, and pull out a few hairs from your head before you catch yourself doing it. After a few minutes, something twists painfully in your gut and you bury your face in your hands, breathing hard against your sweaty skin.

“I can’t do this,” you say, only halfway succeeding at keeping your voice low.

Out of the corner of your eye you see Dave set his phone carefully on his lap and lean slightly closer.
to you. “You alright dude?”

“No,” you sigh out, then pry your fingers away from your face. “I feel like I’m about to have a fucking panic attack. Fuck this appointment, and fuck my dad for not telling me about it.”

“Come on, man, I bet it’ll be over before you even know it,” Dave says, voice low and soft next to you.

You wrap your arms around yourself and try to breathe, the air coming in too fast and shallow. You know from experience that there’s a good chance you’ll be stuck in this room for at least another ten minutes, and every second that goes by just makes breathing feel all the more impossible.

“But if you do want to go home, then it’s up to you,” Dave says. “Maybe you can reschedule your appointment? Tell them your anxiety ate your homework?”

“What?” you ask him, out of breath. “Dave I can barely think right now, don’t make me parse your shitty metaphors on top of that.”

It takes you a couple minutes to process what he said. Right, if you skip this appointment, you won’t be able to get in before the break is over, and you’ll have to find a new endocrinologist somewhere in Seattle.

“I don’t know how long it’ll be until I can see someone else,” you tell him, biting down on your index finger.

“Okay, so,” Dave says, sitting up a little. “Just think of how rad it’ll be to get this over with, and how soon you’ll be back on T, and all the awesome shit that comes with that.”

Dave does bring up a good point, but you’re too busy biting your hand right now to really respond to him.

“Like, uh,” Dave starts, trying to remember. “Your voice getting deeper. And, uh, the body fat thing.”

“Body fat redistribution,” you mumble.

“Yeah, that. And you’ll get more muscle, too, right? Dude, you’re gonna be fuckin’ jacked as shit.”

You let out a small laugh, unable to help yourself.

“And you said you’ve done this a million times before,” Dave continues. “You can do this. Like, maybe not now, maybe today just ain’t your day, but you’re definitely a hundred percent capable of it.”

You let Dave’s words wash over you, feeling a sense of, well, not really calm, but you reach a state of numbness that’s more tolerable than the unbearable anxiety before. You breathe a little deeper as his words ring true in your mind. And after a couple of minutes, someone comes to the door and calls your name (your real name, thank god, because the idea that someone might walk out and say your deadname in front of Dave wasn’t helping your anxiety), and you stand up a bit uneasily, following them out of the waiting room and into your endocrinologist’s office.

You’re floating too much from your panic attack to really pay much attention to the appointment itself, but it goes by without issue. There’s a lot of questions that you answer with “yes” or “no” and before you know it you’re walking back out into the waiting room, prescription in hand. Dave sits in the same spot, and looks up from his phone when you come in.
“Did it go alright?” he asks, standing up and pocketing his phone when you approach him.

“Yeah,” you say dryly, waving the small paper at him before tucking it carefully into your coat pocket. “Pretty much the same shit as always.”

“Cool,” he says, then offers his fist to you. “Proud of you, bro.”

“Yeah, whatever,” you weakly bump your fist against his, trying to laugh it off but not really having the energy. You’re actually pretty fucking exhausted, to be frank.

Dave wraps a comforting arm around your shoulder and leads the way back to street level, and the two of you take a bus back home to spend the rest of the day playing video games in your pajamas.

When New Year’s Eve comes the next day, you and Dave stay in and end up treating the night like any other. You make popcorn and watch movies in your room, and drink sparkling apple cider in lieu of actual alcohol. When the clock strikes midnight you wish Dave a happy new year and pretend that you weren’t just thinking about what it’d be like to kiss him at the end of the countdown.

You go to bed in the new year the same as you have in the days before, side by side in your bed, warm under the shared blankets, split seconds of hands and feet and arms brushing. Sometimes you almost wish for another power out, just to have an excuse to snuggle up again without it being an accident, or maybe you just wish you had the courage to suggest it regardless. Instead you keep your distance and wait for sleep to take you, but at some point, a sleeping Dave wraps his arm around your stomach.

You don’t fall asleep until nearly four in the morning.

==>

Waking up in a new year is exactly the same as waking up any other day, if you’re being honest with yourself. Karkat is still fast asleep next to you, so instead of getting up, you find yourself lying listlessly in the morning light.

So far this whole celebrating holidays with actual, in real life people thing has been generally okay, but at the same time, you feel like you’ve been observing it through a thick fog.

You went through the motions of Christmas with Karkat and his dad, relieved as fuck in hindsight that there was really no religious aspect to it at all. Usually you open up gifts from people who’ve sent them to you from miles away, so you really didn’t know how to handle the shoes situation, except to awkwardly mutter “thank you” at Karkat’s dad several times too many. You’re really glad you have them, though. Those shitty red shoes you had deserved to finally be laid to rest.

In the subsequent days, you struggle to come up with a proper way to thank Rose for her gift that doesn’t involve just screaming into the Pesterchum chat window, or flagellating yourself because you don’t have anything to give her in response. You settle on just saying thanks like a normal person, and send her some of the pictures you took in DC.

You don’t send her the one you took in front of the waterfront, where you tried to take an ironic selfie with Karkat only to look like kind of a jackass next to him, who has a small, soft smile on his face while you have no trace of any emotion on yours at all.

As much as you kind of hate the photo overall, looking at Karkat in it does kind of fill you with a fondness that feels like your chest is inverting on itself, so you opt to not delete it from your camera.

You end up dragging Karkat out of bed around noon, and he strikes up an intense sort of grumpiness.
that you sort of just ignore, because you know by now that it’ll be gone once he’s halfway through his second cup of coffee.

After your lunchtime breakfast you sit with him on the floor in the living room, your laptop open on your knees while he scrolls through Netflix. Hanging out in the basement is alright, but the TV is ancient and there’s always a permeating chill that the heater doesn’t seem to affect at all, and since Karkat’s dad is at work, the two of you have the main floor all to yourself.

It strikes you that it’s been sort of a while since you’ve talked to John and Jade. You haven’t spoken since before the break, actually, and you feel a little bad about leaving them in the dark.

You figure that at this point there’s really no use in trying to hide things anymore. You already told Rose, and the least you could do is say hi and explain where you are. You tell this to Karkat, and he tells you to go for it.

A couple of deep breaths later, you open up Pesterchum.


TG: sup jade
GG: hi!
GG: how are you dave? i feel like its been forever since we talked omg
TG: yeah sorry about that
TG: im good tho im over on the east coast
TG: saw rose and her gf, been stayin over at karkats place
GG: :o really?
GG: sounds fun!
TG: yeah i kinda hitched a ride over here since going back to texas wasnt gonna work out wbu
GG: ive been over at johns! its been really nice but im going back to the island tomorrow
TG: oh shit really?
GG: ive been over at johns! its been really nice but im going back to the island tomorrow
TG: oh shit really?
GG: yeah im actually going back for bec!
GG: i know that he can live on his own but ive missed him so much :(
TG: so youre just goin there on your lonesome huh
GG: yeah but its only for a day before i bring him back here
GG: i probably shouldve gotten him earlier in the break so he could have more time to get used to being around people
GG: but hes a fast learner though so i think hell do fine!
TG: wait what do you mean around people
TG: he moving in with you
GG: actually… yes!
TG: wait what
TG: hold the fuck up
GG: rose gave me the idea for it actually, when she was talking about one of her psychology classes or whatever
GG: she said that some students can get special permission to have pets on campus for mental health related stuff
GG: i talked it over with john and his dad and they were supportive and his dad helped me find someone who could fly me back there on such short notice
GG: and so when i come back next semester ill be able to have bec as an emotional support animal! :D
TG: that giant ass thing are you serious
TG: thats gotta be against some kind of rule
GG: no i checked! its a public university so its a hundred percent legal
TG: they'll really let you have him there? like in class and shit
GG: an emotional support animal doesn't go to class with you and stuff they're different from a service dog
TG: so what is an emotional support animal then
GG: exactly what it sounds like!
GG: it's not an animal trained to do tasks, just one that offers you support
GG: like it's been proven that for a lot of people having pets and spending time with them can help with mental illness and stuff
GG: like there's been studies on it that show that animal friends can actually affect your physical health too it's pretty interesting!
TG: yeah that is pretty cool
TG: i guess its just kind of hilarious imagining you with a giant fuckin bark beast as a support animal
GG: hehe
GG: well i think it'll really help a lot to have bec here
TG: oh yeah
TG: you been feeling down
GG: @-@
TG: sorry i know that was like the junkiest ass way to ask if you have depression
GG: its ok! and i guess the answer is yes…
GG: i dont really talk about it much is all
TG: yeah that's cool
TG: god knows i have plenty of emotional baggage and shit that i dont really
TG: let onto yknow
GG: really :o
TG: yeah i mean guess karkat's kinda privy to some of the stuff considering he literally walked in on me having a mental breakdown last fall
TG: and i guess we've become pretty close since then
TG: me and him
GG: what happened last fall?
GG: if you dont mind me asking
TG: that was when i last went back to texas and saw my bro
TG: things got kinda nasty and i think the stark contrast of being away at college where shit is relatively normal to like
TG: going home and getting punched in the face by him
TG: sorta made me realize that shit was fucked up
TG: sorry i know this shits kinda heavy
GG: dave im really sorry :( i had no idea that your bro was bad or would do something like that? thats so awful…
TG: see i didnt know either
TG: thats what fucks me up the most i think, like that i thought what he put me through was normal
TG: and so when i got back to campus after that i had like an out of body experience and sliced my leg all up
TG: and thats when karkat came in and i dont really remember a whole lot else about that day except that he like took care of me and shit
TG: jade idk if you know this but karkat is like the nicest guy on the planet underneath that crabby exterior
GG: oh yes ive met the gooey center of karkat vantas before believe me ;)
GG: you said you cut up your leg though…
GG: do you do that a lot?
TG: eh not really tbh
TG: mostly i get the urge to fuck myself up when im having like full blown panic attacks
TG: unhealthy coping mechanism and all
GG: i do it sort of a lot @-@
TG: shit how often
GG: mm like a few times a week?
GG: like on my legs so no one sees
TG: what do you use you should get rid of it
TG: give it to me
GG: i have like razor blades…
GG: only if you give me what you use when you do it!
TG: what no then its just a shitty exchange of dangerous shit that neither of us have any business havin
TG: tell you what ill take my safety pins and your razors and we can both go throw them into lake fucking washington
GG: would that work though? like just getting rid of them?
TG: i mean itd probably help
TG: youre gonna have bec with you soon youre gonna get better and you dont need those things
TG: and i dont need mine
GG: are you getting better?
TG: i think so
TG: like idk but i think being away from my bro for the foreseeable future and hopefully forever is helping
GG: thats good!
TG: yeah?
GG: yeah!
GG: also i heard that winter in seattle can be bad for depression because of the darkness and all
GG: so if thats a contributing factor we should feel at least a little better in the spring?
TG: god PLEASE
TG: ive been ass deep in snow ALL BREAK im so ready for the sun to come back
GG: john says theres cherry trees and stuff in the city we should go see them when they bloom!
GG: all of us, like me you and bec and karkat and john and rose
GG: i think itd be fun
TG: hell yeah lets go look at some pink ass trees
GG: :)
GG: oh and before i forget, happy new year dave!
TG: oh yeah lmao happy new year
GG: also how was christmas? get any cool gifts?
TG: rose got me a rad camera despite not giving a shit about the holiday wbu
GG: johns dad got us lots of kinda corny stuff hehe
GG: plus we both got new phones which we really needed @-@
TG: lmao rip your prepaid androids
TG: please tell me he did you a favor and got yall some goddamn iphones
GG: theyre galaxies i think? thats good right
TG: B/
GG: ugh whatever they have a cool name and i like them! also stop being an apple snob :P
TG: never
TG: for real tho thats cool now you HAVE to add me on snapchat
GG: so many big letters from mr coolkid today, you taking a page out of mr capslocks book?
TG: what
TG: you mean like copying karkat or whatever because im totally not doing that
TG: sometimes a dude just has to yell some words okay
GG: pssh whatever you say
GG: its not like youve been staying at his place all break and hanging out with him all the time!
TG: lmao okay so maybe i have been copying him like subconsciously
TG: but hes been jacking my southern swag so i have the right
GG: southern………swag……………
TG: i swear to god i heard him say yall one time
GG: southern. swag.
GG: there is no such thing
GG: and if there is you definitely dont have it!
TG: jade stop cyberbullying me B(
GG: im screenshotting this conversation >:D
TG: B((
GG: just the one part though, not the serious stuff up there
TG: oh
TG: tbh i kind of forgot about all of that
TG: can we go back to you making fun of me
GG: idk do you want to give me a reason to make fun of you :P
GG: also just wondering… who all knows about that stuff?
TG: karkat rose and now you
TG: im gonna tell john soon probably
GG: well hes not busy right now if you wanna pester him
TG: fuck
TG: idk if im ready for that conversation tbh
GG: thats ok, but if youre worried how hell respond i promise hell be super understanding
GG: and if he isnt ill hit him with a broom >:)
TG: thanks B’)
GG: is that a single tear leaking out from under your shades
TG: no its an apostrophe
GG: lol omg im gonna go because i gotta start packing but you should talk to john if youre up to it!
TG: alright ill try i guess
GG: hope the rest of your break is good and im glad we got to talk <3
TG: yeah same
TG: take care jade ttyl
GG: :

-- gardenGnostic [GG] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 12:02 --

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 12:09 --

TG: sup john
EB: hey dave!
EB: how have you been? dude it's been forever since we’ve talked!
TG: yeah sorry
EB: hows texas?
TG: im not in texas
EB: ?
TG: okay so
TG: this isnt really just a friendly catch up yknow like i guess i have some shit i gotta say
EB: huh? are you like mad at me or something?
TG: what no
TG: its just personal shit that ive already told everyone else about and i guess i gotta tell you too
EB: man, i feel so special dave, being the very last to know about this big secret you have!
TG: look im sorry dude i didnt mean to like leave you out
TG: if it makes you feel better i literally only JUST told jade about it
EB: okay, so what is it? what’s the big deal?
EB: or wait! lemme have a few tries at guessing it.
TG: uh
EB: do you have some kind of terrible illness that you’re dying from?
TG: holy shit dude no
EB: hmm. did you win the lottery, and are now trying to decide who to trust with the knowledge that you are now a mega billionaire?
TG: no john
EB: okay, good. that would’ve been really awful, not to mention awkward, heh.
EB: is your big secret that you’re gay?
TG: whaat
EB: because if it is, that’s totally okay! just throwing that out there.
TG: john
EB: wait give me one more shot
EB: hmmmmm…
EB: this is not about my sexuality okay just listen
TG: uh
TG: at karkats place?
EB: aughhhhh
TB: okay so karkat knew about the thing when we went to the airport and so instead of me going to texas or staying in washington he invited me over to his house and also rose was there at one point because of her gf and
TG: yeah
EB: wait you said you weren’t in texas, so where are you?
TG: uh
TG: its a long story okay
EB: well tell it, because i’m kind of really confused right now dave!
TG: okay so karkat knew about the thing when we went to the airport and so instead of me going to texas or staying in washington he invited me over to his house and also rose was there at one point because of her gf and
TG: im talking about how i grew up with a man who thought that physically fighting a fucking TEN YEAR OLD was okay
TG: who couldnt bother to do anything considered the bare fucking minimum of parenting
TG: who wasnt even HOME half the time
TG: FUCK

Your eyes are already welling up painfully at this point, but you can’t cry, not yet, not in front of anyone, not while you’re talking to your friend. You try to force yourself to pull it together.

EB: dave i dont understand, i thought you liked your bro?
EB: and like, the fighting thing, was just cool stuff with swords?
TG: he fucking starved me
TG: either on purpose or because he just didnt give a shit i dont know
EB: starved you??

EB: dave if this is some kind of joke or prank it’s not funny.
TG: yes the fact that he STARVED ME is totally a joke
TG: i had hardly any food and i had to hide shit in my closet IT WAS SO FUNNY JOHN
EB: dave, i don’t…
EB: you seem really upset and i don’t know what to say or do??
EB: you’ve never talked about your bro like this and i don’t really know where all this is coming from.
TG: i didnt talk about him like this because i thought he was cool and that deep down under the coolguy schtick he still loved me or whatever
TG: as to where all this is “coming from” its fucking coming from years of being in denial of all of this shit finally coming to the surface
TG: catch me emerging from the dark murky depths with a gnarly old treasure chest
TG: shits rotted to hell and covered in barnacles crack it open what do you get
TG: fuckin years of childhood trauma
TG: god this is why i didnt want to fuckin tell anyone about this look at me im a fucking mess
EB: shouldn’t you be talking to him about this stuff?
TG: what
EB: i mean, wouldn’t talking it over with him help? you seem really mad dave.
TG: no offense but the last time i tried to have a conversation with him he literally punched me in the head over and over until i blacked out
EB: what the fuck!!
TG: I KNOW
EB: dave what the fuck you need to tell the police!
TG: lol and thats not the only time something like that happened
TG: i have all these memories of shit that keep coming back that i guess i just pushed away or like didnt think of as being abnormal
TG: i used to regard the time he gave me stitches as being a fond memory
TG: but actually he was the reason why i needed them, and he was probably just trying to keep any authorities from finding out what happened
TG: stitching me up because i got myself cut in a strife was just another task put upon him
TG: anything he ever did for me was most likely because he didnt have any other choice
TG: i was and always will be just a burden to him

You go numb as the rest of the conversation plays out. As you type out responses to John, as you tell him not to tell his dad or get anyone involved. Your fingers move on your keyboard and you’re not sure how much time is passing, but that word, “burden,” keeps repeating in your head.

You maintain the illusion of being collected just enough to say bye to John, to reassure him you’re fine, to tell him that you just got a little worked up, is all, that things weren’t really as bad as you made it seem (they were). When you close Pesterchum, your face is actually, literally numb, tingling even, and Karkat looks over at you when you snap your laptop shut.

“How’d it go?” he asks, turning to face you a little better on the floor.

“Not great.” Your jaw starts to wobble, and you let out a weak laugh. “They know now, though, it’s cool. John and Jade, they’re cool. I just—” With a strangled groan you bury your face in your hands, knocking your sunglasses off and onto the floor.

“Dave?” Karkat asks, scooting closer to you. You let him pry your hands away from your face, and you look at him as tears start to run from your eyes.

“Sorry,” you whisper, trying to blink them away. You want to wipe them with your hands, but they’re still in his, and oh--
Your hands are in his.

“Dave, what happened?” he asks.

When you try to talk, more tears spill out, and you have to take a hand back from him to cover your face, because your mouth is twisting now, and no one looks attractive when they cry but you think you’re especially bad. You try to stop a sob from escaping your lips. You’re unsuccessful.

Why does having emotions have to be so embarrassing? And not to mention difficult? You’re having a hell of a time right now.

“I was just… a burden to him…” you whisper, any louder and you’d be sobbing it, unintelligible and messy.

“What was that?” he says, squeezing your hand. You shut your eyes and try to regain control of your breathing.

“I was nothing to him… he fuckin’ hated me--”

Karkat shushes you and takes you into his arms, and you lean into him, burying your face in the crook of his neck. It’s so easy, being close to him, having him touch and hold you, and for some reason that thought pulls on your heart the hardest. Sobs start to wrack through your body against your will, and every audible sound of you crying is so damn mortifying, you wish you could make yourself stop.

“Shh, Dave, it’s okay,” he says, and all you can hear in his voice is soft concern. Not disgust. You can’t wrap your head around it. Tears are spilling out of your eyes where your face is pressed against his neck and all you can think about is how wet and gross it must feel to him.

Karkat moves his hand back and forth along your back, a gesture so soothing it takes you a little by surprise. You wonder if Karkat maybe has a natural gift for calming people down, because after just a few minutes of him holding you, shushing you, rubbing your back, you start breathing normally again. You’re still crying, though, tears streaking down your face of their own accord, but it’s less physically taxing. It’s easier.

“Do you want some tissues?” he asks after a while.

“Oh my god, please,” you laugh, pulling away to wipe snot with the back of your sleeve.

Karkat gets up to leave, and comes back a minute later with a roll of toilet paper in lieu of any actual boxes of tissues lying around. You take it from him with a shaking hand and tear away a piece to blow your nose, self conscious about the quiet and careful way you do it, which is a weird thing to be self conscious about.

“Sorry,” you murmur, as he sits down in front of you again. Whether you’re apologizing for the nasal side effects of your waterworks or just your display in its entirety, you’re not really sure.

You’re half expecting him to say something like “for what?” or “don’t apologize,” but he doesn’t say anything yet, just looks you over, wearing worry on his face.

You watch as he carefully plucks your shades from the floor. “Do you want these back?” he asks, eyes flitting to the side. “Uh, it’s just that you look really uncomfortable, and I don’t know if wearing the shades helps but I feel like it does, because sometimes when you don’t have them on I can tell you really hate it, and--”
“Thanks,” you say, taking them from him and placing them back onto your face. You snuffle a little bit, but feel a little better now that you have them on again. “Well, that was fucking embarrassing.”

“Are you okay?” Karkat asks, hands folded in his lap and eyes watching you intently. Worrying over you. For some reason, it makes you vaguely uncomfortable.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” you wipe your nose again. “Just had a moment, you know how it is.”

Karkat laughs softly. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

“Hey, so,” you start, turning your words over in your head for a minute. “I was talking to John just now, will you uh, not tell him about--”

“Yeah, of course,” he says, and you know he means it.

You and Karkat go the rest of the day like nothing happened, but your embarrassment lingers on, burning slow like glowing embers in your throat. Sometimes your fingers go to the arms of your shades and just hold them there, secure on your face, secure in general.

You’re exhausted in a way you’re not really sure how to articulate yet, but you think it has something to do with feeling like you have to snuff out every emotion that comes up. Or maybe because for once, you finally didn’t.

When night falls, you turn in earlier than Karkat and sleep for a long, long time.

===> Be Karkat.

The early days of the new year bring with them a sense of foreboding that only grows the longer you go without making any effort to get ready to go back to college again. You spend your last day of vacation stressing out over how much laundry you actually have to do, and how when you repack your suitcase, it seems to have magically gotten smaller since the last time you used it.

Dave gets by well enough, although he doesn’t have as much to his name. That doesn’t stop you from being jealous over how he only has one load of laundry to do, though, but you try not to let him hear you complain about it so much.

Your flight is at two in the morning, and you don’t even bother to try to get any sleep beforehand. Around midnight your dad drives you both to the airport, wishing you well when he drops you off and telling Dave that it was nice to have him. You think your dad liked him well enough, at least probably more than your other friends. But that could just be wishful thinking. You really hope that your dad liked him, because you, uh, kind of like him a lot.

(But we already know that, of course.)

When you land in Washington, you’re both too exhausted from the flight and the night without sleep to talk at all on the way to campus. But when you’re at your dorm building and lugging your tired bodies up the stairs, you have a nagging sense that you should say… something.

“So like,” you start, halfway to your floor and with Dave a few steps ahead of you. You make sure to mentally curse his longer leg span. “Did you… are you glad that you came with me?”

He stops and turns to look at you. “What?”

“I mean, now that the break’s over. And we’re back here, where…” You recall your conversation in this very stairwell, the one you had weeks ago. “I guess I’m just wondering if you regret coming or
“Karkat,” he says, and he’s grinning at you. You’re not sure if that makes you mad or if you find it sweet. Maybe both. “Of course I’m glad I tagged along with you instead of holing myself up in my cramped as hell lil shithole here. For real, dude, I had a nice time.” He starts going up the stairs again. “Thanks for like, actually inviting me and shit.”

You try to process the fact that he’s the one thanking you, mouth ready to spit out all kinds of barely formulated thoughts on the subject, but he speaks up again.

“We got to hang out as bros all winter break and had a fuckin’ great time, alright? Don’t get hung up wondering if I regretted going, ‘cause I can promise you that I did not.”

You clamp your mouth shut and nod, worry snuffed out like a cigarette.

“And we’re real with each other, right?” he says, stopping outside the door to your floor.

Your mind should go to all the talks you’ve had with Dave, the trust between you two, how you’ve both been vulnerable in front of each other but that it was okay, because you both really care about each other.

And it does go to those things, files them away as evidence, but before that, it goes to how you’ve been harboring romantic feelings for him since November. You feel guilty, you know you shouldn’t, but you do.

“Y-yeah, of course,” you tell him, and every part of you feels open and raw.

You walk down the hall to your own room, and for the first time in a very long while, you’re left all by yourself. No Dave sitting on your bed, or waiting for you to come back in the other room, or off taking a shower. Mouth always running, except for when he’s asleep. Sometimes while he’s asleep. It’s not like Dave’s not going to be around anymore, you live just down the hall from him, for fuck’s sake. But you’re suddenly struck with how things will be different.

Part of you breathes a sigh of relief. Another part of you doesn’t want it to be over just yet.

All you can do for now, though, is trudge your way through the oncoming adjustment period.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

warnings for intense dysphoria and the f slur

See the end of the chapter for more notes

==> Be Dave.

The first thing you do when you get back to your dorm room is lie down in your bed and sleep for a very, very long time. John hadn’t been there when you first arrived, nor is he there when you wake up. For a long while you just lie in your bed, soaking up solitude you haven’t known for at least two weeks.

Sometimes it’s nice to be alone. But other times, like now, you’re not really sure how you feel about it.

Your twin sized mattress feels even smaller now, after so many nights sharing a queen with Karkat. And it’s so, so quiet. The kind of quiet that lights up your nerves and puts you on alert. You almost wish your upstairs neighbors would blare their bad music or that a group of boys would choose now to stampede through the hallway, sounds that usually bothered you when you were just chilling in here with John, doing the bare minimum of studying.

More than anything, though, you wish you could hear Karkat’s voice, going on about the contrived plot in a book he was reading, mumbling under his breath about how annoying something was, or humming along to his music. Karkat is a fairly vocal person, you’re realizing, which seems kind of obvious given his tendency to raise his voice. But it’s also true in less noticeable ways, things you only pick up on after spending so much time alone with him.

And not it’s not just the subtleties of his personality that you’ve picked up on. There are so many useless tidbits of information you’ve collected about him after the winter break, information you’re not really sure what to do with.

You know that Karkat uses an electric toothbrush and flosses every single night, without fail. You know that he always kicks his socks off in his sleep and prefers to lay on his stomach. You know that his chest is horribly itchy whenever he takes his binder off, and that he washes his binders by hand in the bathroom sink with lavender soap. You know his favorite soda is regular Coke and that he washes his dishes right after using them.

You know that in general he’s way, way more anxious than he lets on. It’s only when he’s having a full blown panic attack that you realize how long he was near the boiling point just before that, but you like to think you’re better now at being able to tell when he starts to not feel so good.

You know that there is an incriminating number of Nicholas Sparks novels on his bookshelf and that he gives absolutely zero fucks about them being there.

These are things you don’t need to know, but you also wouldn’t give them up for anything. You could be sitting in an exam failing to recall whatever arbitrary date you had to memorize from the dark depths of your neglected textbooks, and you’d be fine with it, as long as you still knew that
Karkat pours his coffee creamer into his mug before his coffee.

A sigh leaves your lips as you roll over. You wonder if he’d still be on your mind this much if you hadn’t went to DC and spent the break doing exactly what you’re doing now, laying in bed and ignoring your growing hunger and need to pee.

You do get out of bed, then, out of some hope that the short walk to and from the bathroom would be enough to take your mind off things. To take your mind off him.

Him.

Whenever you think about him for too long, the warm, soft feelings you have when you usually think of your friends start to give way to a heavy, sickly feeling in your gut.

You’re not stupid. You know that you’ve been veering way too close to not-straight territory with him, may have even already sped up up to the precipice of something. It’s easy to go about your business when you don’t remember that you’ve laid in the same bed with him, that you let him hold you while you cried, that you kissed him on the fucking cheek.

When you do remember, though, it’s like something glaring down at you, something hot and harsh and for a few seconds you just stand in the hallway. Listening. Straining to hear if there’s anyone around you, anyone hiding, anyone who’s a threat.

The cause of such an action isn’t lost on you. For a moment you have a sick sense of relief, that maybe it’s just Bro. The way he treated you. It’s just years of abuse that’s making you act all weird, making you desperate for any kind of normal human contact.

And then taking it too far. The only explanation you have for why Karkat didn’t kick your pathetic ass to the curb over the break is that he must’ve really felt sorry for you.

You rub hard at your eyes as you keep walking, barely suppressing a groan. If you go too far down that self deprecating tangent, you’ll be stuck here all day.

For some reason, you think that your next course of action should be to talk to Rose. To check in with her, to thank her for the camera, to… talk, you guess.

But only after finally going to the bathroom and showering, though. Your muscles are sore from a bad night of sleep on the plane and your head hurts from the jet lag, so you take your time under the strong current of hot water.

When you get dressed, you swear you can smell Karkat on your clothes.

There’s a light dusting of snow on campus when you go outside, but it’s still a great deal warmer than Maryland was. You only just pull on your coat over a long sleeved shirt, not in the mood to get all bundled up just for the short walk to Rose’s dorm.

The building she and Jade live in is wholly unfamiliar to you. When you step inside, there’s a growing fear that you don’t actually remember where her room is, having only visited one time before. Your’s and the girls’ birthdays were all in the same week, so you had celebrated by way of making a mess out of their room and getting asked politely to leave by the RA when John, Jade and Karkat got too loud.

You’re fairly certain that it was on the second floor, and down the hallway some, but everything starts to blur together when you get there. Luckily for you, though, you catch Rose just as she’s unlocking the door.
You grin as you approach, her having not noticed you until you’re close enough to poke her in the head.

So you do.

“David,” she says, plainly, and you get the feeling she knew you were there the entire time.

You think you kind of like that.

“Rosalind,” you offer in response, and she turns to look at you after the lock clicks.

“My full name isn’t Rosalind,” she says as she steps inside. You follow when she leaves the door open.

“Mine isn’t David. Didn’t stop you, though, did it?”

She sighs and shrugs off her coat and bag. On the floor is an open suitcase, haphazardly unpacked with shirts and socks flying everywhere. Jade’s side is empty and clean; she and John must be taking their time getting back, you figure.

“What brings you here, Dave?” she asks. “It’s not like you to pay visits.”

“Uh,” you say, as your mind blanks out on what to say. “Y’know, just thought I’d check in with y’all.”

She doesn’t say anything as she rummages through her bag, pulling out a bottle of water and some yogurt and sticking them in the fridge.

“If I’m bothering you, though, I’ll fuck off back to my own room, I mean I don’t really know why I came over here myself.” She’s still preoccupied with the fridge, rearranging something to fit. “Guess I just got myself a mad case of wandering-around-campus-like-a-dipshit… itus, or whatever.”

“You’re rambling,” she says, standing up and facing you. “Also, I don’t care if you just want to come over and say hi, Dave.”

You let out a breath you didn’t know you were holding, but refrain from relaxing as she looks you over.

“But something tells me that’s not why you came over here.”

You deflate, kicking your shoes against the shoddy carpet. You know she’s right, but you don’t know why she’s right.

“I mean, I’m here to thank you, for one thing. Uh, for the camera?”

She doesn’t look convinced.

“You didn’t have to get me something that nice, you know,” you tell her, and she finally breaks her contemplative stance, folding her arms around herself and looking down at the floor.

“I… kind of did it on impulse. If you don’t want it--” she starts.

“No,” you interrupt her. “I mean, I definitely appreciate it, I’m just wondering…”

“Why?” she offers, and you nod. She sits down on the bed, thinking. “It’s sort of hard to explain. I noticed I had certain… issues, with giving people gifts. Receiving them, too. Mostly the second
You try not to wear your confusion on your face, instead opting to stand quietly while she goes on.

“I noticed it when Kan and I first exchanged anniversary gifts,” she pauses, smiling when the other girl’s name passes her lips. “For some reason, it feels insincere to me, the whole process. With Mother, it always sort of was. I suppose it makes sense.”

You remain silent, unsure of what to say in this situation. With careful movements, you sit down on the bed next to her.

“There is this idea in psychiatry, that if you have a negative emotion, you should do the opposite action to that.”

“Sounds easier said than done,” you say.

She huffs out a small laugh. “Yes, I suppose so. Hence the impulsiveness of my decision. I was… worried about the holidays. I may have gone over the top.”

“Hey, I mean, we ain’t complaining,” you tell her, and she doesn’t react, just stares down at her hands. “Come on, you have no business lookin’ so sad over doing somethin’ so nice.”

She gives you a small smile. “Thanks.”

“Did it work?” you ask her. “The opposite action thing?”

“I have no idea,” she says, bluntly. “To be honest, I tend to look at my own issues through a strictly objective lense.”

“Like you’re your own patient?”

She nods.

You think for a moment about what she said, about opposite actions. Your instinct here is to get up and leave, to go straight back to your dorm to be alone. Instead, you decide to open up your mouth and force out the words.

“Can I ask you something?”

You don’t look at her, but you can sense the apprehension from where she sits next to you. “What?”

“How do you know… if like…” the words stick in your throat, and you suddenly wish you had chosen to do this over text. “How do you know that you’re not straight?”

You don’t look at her for a reaction, just stare down at the floor, your face burning and something like hot coals in your chest.

“I admit that’s… not what I was expecting you to ask.”

You let out a small laugh, dry and breathless. “Yeah, sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she says, gently. “And I suppose I’d start with saying that straight people don’t usually ask themselves if they’re straight or not.”

“Yeah, no shit,” you say, rubbing at the bridge of your nose. “The thing is, I don’t know if I’m just entertaining the idea out of some kind of weird curiosity, or there’s like… real, sincere, actual
attraction to, uh, boys, going on here.”

Your whole body goes hot as you force the words out, burning harder as you wait for her response.

“Is this something that you’ve been thinking about a lot?” she asks.

“I don’t know, I guess? My brain never lets me get far enough down the rabbit hole to figure it out, though. Just kinda stops that rabbit train right as it leaves the rabbit station.”

She sighs. “Mixed metaphors aside,” she says, “it sounds like it’s causing you a lot of internal conflict.”

You curl your hands around themselves, digging your nails into your palms. You didn’t come here for a therapy session; you’re not really sure why you came here, actually, but your mouth keeps moving on its own.

“It’s like, I can see it being true, the liking guys thing,” you say, voice quiet, hesitant. “And on some level I think I know that it is, but for some reason I just can’t accept it. And it’s so fucked up and dumb that I can’t because all the evidence is here in front of me, it just feels so wrong to believe in it.”

You look over at Rose, who sits still and poised, as if ready to speak but unsure of when it would be appropriate.

“You’re saying,” you start, slowly, “I’m homophobic, to my own damn self? How the fuck does that work?” You feel the dangerous beginnings of a lump in your throat.

“We live in a homophobic society, Dave.”

You sigh and grind the heels of your palms into your eyes. You don’t want to talk about this right now, you’re realizing. If you could go back in time to before you spat that question out at her, you would.

“You don’t have to…” she starts, picking over her words. “It’s okay to just think about. You don’t have to call yourself anything, you can just think about it.”

“That’s… not really what I was expecting you to say,” you tell her, mirroring her own words from earlier. Something in you unhooks though, and you relax just a bit.

“Did you think I would make fun of you?” she asks, and all you can do is look at her.

She sighs, and looks down at her nails, picking off chipped black polish from her thumbs.

“Dave, I know I’ve joked a lot about you being gay when we were younger. It was in bad taste, and
I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” you whisper, quickly, anxious for this conversation to be over with.

“Look,” she starts, sitting up a bit. “This Tuesday is the first meeting of the semester for the LGBT resource center,” she says. “There’ll be lots of newcomers, people of all sorts. I’d like it if you came with me.”

Your heart lurches into your throat, and you choke out a reply. “No, thanks. Uh, I’m good.”

“Just showing up isn’t any kind of definitive gesture, if that’s what you’re worried about,” she says. “There are straight people who come to the meetings, too.”

You consider her. “I mean… I guess I could probably come. If you want me to.”

She smiles at you, and you could take this chance to leave, but there’s still another question on your mind.

“Did you ever deal with this bullshit?” you ask, wrapping your arms tight around yourself, eyes focused intently on the little hole in your jeans, right over your knee.

“To an extent, yes. I called myself many things before I was sure that I was a lesbian. Looking back, I was entirely wrong, of course. It can be tough to tell what exactly your internalized prejudices are keeping you from admitting to yourself.”

She gives you a light pat on the arm and you turn your head to look at her again.

“Well do you think…” you start, hesitantly, “that living with Mom, I don’t know, helped?”

She raises a brow, and you instantly wish you hadn’t said anything. “Well, I mean, as far as parents go, she’s not perfect by any means, but… I suppose it could’ve been worse.”

“Yeah,” you say, pointedly, and you see her cringe.

“I mean, with regards to sexuality--”

“Yes,” you repeat, on impulse, something burning hot in your throat when you realize what you just said.

She casts her eyes down at the floor. “Dave… about Bro,” she says.

Your mouth goes dry.

“I know it’s a sensitive subject, and neither of us are really ones for having emotions unironically,” she says, and you laugh, dryly. “But if you ever want to talk about it…”

“I don’t know what I would even talk about,” you say, too quickly and stumbling over your words. “Like, what else is there to put on the table? He’s a shitty guy, that’s it. End of story.”

“Well, what about the sexuality thing, then? What did you mean by that?” She folds her hands in her lap, and you can physically feel her putting on the therapist act.

“He’s a guy who plays homoeroticism like second fiddle to his ironic hypermasculine persona and yet calls his kid a faggot for not gripping the hilt of a sword tight enough.” The air rushes out of you when that slur passes your lips, but Rose doesn’t flinch.
“Unpredictability in parents is definitely a marker for emotional abuse,” she says, clinically, like she’s not talking about her brother and biological father. You think you almost prefer that.

“Rose, I don’t want to do this right now,” you tell her, gently, because you think that maybe her assuming this role has less to do with trying to one-up you than it just being a way to cope with the awkward situation.

“Right. Sorry.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Did he really call you that word?” she asks, voice soft.

You swallow thickly. “Once or twice, I guess. Didn’t ever pay it any mind.”

“Until now?”

“Until… recently,” you say.

Rose starts to say more, but you suddenly find yourself lost in your own thoughts. You remember Bro pushing you down onto the hot asphalt of the roof after you failed to parry one of his attacks. The skin of your elbow broke on the impact, stinging, hot and wet with blood, and you clenched your jaw to keep from crying out. He said the tilt of your wrist made you look like a fag, that you were asking for it to be broken.

“Dave?”

You squeeze your eyes shut for half a second, trying to blink away the memory. “Sorry, totally fuckin’ spaced out there for a sec. What’d you say?”

“I said,” she starts, then sighs. “Nothing. I’ll stop asking you about it.”

“You hear from Jade, yet?” you ask, trying to change the subject.

“I texted her when I got here, but she hasn’t replied.”

“You hear about the dog?” you ask, grinning when her whole posture slumps at once.

“Yes, I’ve heard about the big, gigantic hell dog that’ll be living with us. And I did agree to it, mind you,” she says. “Mostly because I have a history of intimidating dogs into submission just by glaring at them,” she adds, and you have no idea if she’s joking.

“It’ll be nice for her,” she says after a moment, and you nod in agreement.

“Tell me when she gets here, okay?” you say as you make your way to the door.

“Yeah, sure,” she says, standing up from the bed.

You’re about to say goodbye when she steps forward and pulls you into a hug. You wish you could hide the surprised gasp that leaves your lips, or the way that you hug her back tighter, pulling your sister close, clinging to any sense of security. Instead, you just make yourself pull away after what feels like too soon.

“I’ll see you later,” you tell her, head heavy with more feelings than you’re equipped to deal with. You hear her say something, goodbye, probably, and in something of a daze, you step outside.
The first day you wake up back in Washington is very, very weird. For a moment you think you’re still in your bed back home, and there’s a good few minutes spent being very confused about how your bed got smaller, and where the fuck Dave went.

When your brain turns back on and you register that Dave isn’t there because your winter vacation is over and it’s time to go back to your respective lives, the sudden sadness that washes over you feels like a punch to the gut.

You curl underneath the blankets, not at all up for the world today.

That was your one chance, you realize. You’ll never be that close to Dave again. Never feel his warmth as you fall asleep, never see him just as he wakes up. Those are the thoughts that play over and over in your head as you just lay there, feeling sorry for yourself.

You know you’re probably just being dramatic, but you have a feeling that today will be a day for pervasive negativity. There’s a familiar heaviness in your body, that feeling of both being too small and too big, in different ways, in different places.

With slow, heavy movements, you drag yourself out of bed. You don’t need to look in the mirror to know that your hair is sticking up wildly in every direction, or that the bags under your eyes are probably worse than before you fell asleep. Still, you look at yourself in the mirror on the back of your door, really look at yourself, at your face and hair. At your body, at your hips and stomach and exposed legs. Unthinking, just… looking. For however long, you don’t know.

You feel like… you feel like you could probably wear a sports bra and a tight t-shirt today and go to class like that, and everyone who looked at you would see a girl with a pixie cut. A thought that comes out of nowhere, but settles with sick certainty in the pit of your stomach. The fact that you’re only two apparel choices away from not passing tells you that you don’t actually pass at all, not really.

Another minute goes by before you tear your eyes away and move to get dressed. You focus on how your binder doesn’t completely flatten your chest and how your jeans are too long for you, on the softness in your jaw and small shoulders.

All you have to do from here on out is bring your prescription to the campus pharmacy and wait for it to be filled, but for some reason, you can’t find yourself getting excited about the prospect.

You guess it’s just one of those days.

Nonetheless, you fish out the paper your doctor gave you and put on your coat and backpack. When you finally leave your room you don’t think you feel any different than before you got dressed, or any different than before you went on T, before you put on your first binder, before you cut your hair.

You grit your teeth as you step outside. There’s a swarm of students coming in and out of the hall, lugging suitcases and calling out loudly to each other. You glare daggers at anyone who meets your eyes and push your way past people, sometimes forcibly so. Some people turn to face you, glaring back. Some people whose faces you recognize wave hello, friendly and sweet, but you don’t have it in you to respond in turn.

You really, really wish that you didn’t have to see people today. That they didn’t have to see you. That they couldn’t see you.
Luckily, your current destination isn’t too far away. There are other students in the health center when you step inside, but not nearly as much as the residence halls. You breathe out a stilted sigh when the warm air washes over you, the heater on just high enough to be mildly uncomfortable.

You drop off your prescription without issue, and are told to come back in a couple hours. The fact that you’ll have to make this journey twice in the same day makes something in your temple throb; even just walking over here kind of made you want to start screaming.

Just as you’re about to head back to your room, a loud, booming bark shakes through the room. You jump and look around for the source, just about to verbally fillet some sorry dog owner when you see her.

Jade is sternly telling a large and foreboding white dog to be quiet, eyebrows knit tight together and long hair tied up on top of her head. At the sight of a familiar face you suddenly find yourself cooling down. You start to walk towards her.

She sees you right away. “Hi Karkat!”

You can’t stop yourself from smiling, even if she is accompanied by a creature that could definitely kill you. “Hey, Jade. It’s been a fuckin’ while.”

Her arms are full of paperwork but she pulls you into a hug anyways. “I know,” she says, dragging out her lament. “I missed all you guys so much!”

The large dog sits at her feet, wearing a green harness and an expression just short of a snarl. “Oh, and don’t mind Bec, he’s just stressed out right now, is all!”

“Bec?” you ask. She hands over some papers to a person on the other side of the counter, and you wait patiently while she wraps up whatever it is she’s doing.

“Yeah, this little guy here!” she pats his head, then starts making her way to the exit. You follow.

“Little?” you ask, because this dog easily comes up to your chest just standing on all fours, and you’re pretty sure his paws are bigger than your hands.

She laughs, reaching down to scratch his ears when you get outside. “Yeah, guess not. But he’ll always be a baby to me, no matter how big he is.”

The dog does seem more relaxed now that you’re outside, but you still refrain from petting him.

“What is he… doing here?” you ask, walking with her as she heads back to her own residence hall.

“He’s here to live with me! Y’know, as an emotional support animal.” she says excitedly, and you’re torn between being happy for her and being horrified at the thought of such a big animal in a dorm room.

“That’s… uh,” is what you settle on saying.

“I know what you’re thinking, but Bec will be able to get plenty of exercise here, and he’s a super good dog.” You watch as he walks along her obediently, turning to look back at you two every once in awhile.

“I mean, I trust your judgement,” you tell her, and she gives you a small smile. “If anyone can find self care in harboring an apex predator just barely domesticated enough to not tear our throats out,
it’d be you, Jade.”

She just laughs and lets Bec pull her the rest of the way.

You part ways when you get to her building, and figure that since she’s here, John must be, too. You’d rather leave him to reunite with Dave for the time being, heading instead towards the cheapest coffee shop you know of. It’s been probably an hour since you woke up, more if you count how long you just laid there in bed, and your head is screaming for you to satisfy your caffeine addiction.

Jade and her dog was a nice enough distraction, but as you walk you still feel achingly dysphoric. You grit your teeth and try not to look at your reflection in passing windows.

==> Be Dave.

You return to your room all light and out of breath, still reeling from your conversation with Rose. Part of you considers going to pester Karkat for a distraction, but another part of you is quick to say that that is the last thing you should do.

A text from John arrives about an hour later, saying something about traffic and waking up late but that he’s on campus now. You take a deep breath and steel yourself.

The last time you talked to John you threw tact out the window and strung Bro up as the abuser he is, and ended up heaving sobs onto Karkat’s chest in the wake of all of it. It still feels raw, if you think about it too much. But knowing John, with his penchant for easygoing denial, it probably won’t ever come up.

Still, the minutes you spend waiting for him to get to the room are drowned out by your heart thumping in your ears. When the lock to your door clicks, you sit up and put your shades on your face faster than you can say “John Egbert.”

John comes in noisily, his suitcase catching on the bottom of the doorway, him calling out a “hey, Dave!” as he disencumbers the wheels.

“Hey, man,” you say, as he closes the door and walks towards you, arms outspread. He pulls you into a smothering, friendly hug and then lets go after about two seconds.

“Missed you, bud!” he says, flashing a smile. The same big, bucktoothed smile that used to put you in a cold sweat when you saw it over Skype, late into the night on weekends where you didn’t have a care in the world, and--

You excuse yourself to the bathroom.

John is more than a little confused but waves you off as you leave. When you get there you sort of just stand in there, feet planted to the tile, hands tight over your face, not even breathing for about a solid minute.

Years ago, in middle and high school, you used to have a certain fixation for John that you used to chalk up to him being your only guy-friend and you just generally being a lonely weirdo. Now though, it hits you in the face, hits you like a truck, like a fucking truck just hit you in the face, somehow, that the jumble of feelings you had for John could be more accurately described as a crush.

You… had a crush on him. On a guy. How you are only just realizing this now, so suddenly you want to scream, you have no clue. You almost laugh at yourself, at how all of that went over your head when you were younger.
But if that really is the case, then this whole thing with… this whole thing you’ve been skirting around is suddenly all the more probable. Any sort of comfort you can find in that exists parallel to the growing horror that settles in your bones.

You return quickly to your room, so as not to make John suspicious when you bolted on him right as he got back. He’s unpacking his laptop and looks up at you when you come back in.

“Man, I am so glad I registered for later classes this semester. Waking up at eight every school day was a night mare.”

“Yeah, I switched to later classes, too,” you sigh, glad that he’s talking about school and not your new year’s’ breakdown. “Pretty sure Karkat’s keeping his schedule though, the punctual bastard.”

John laughs. “Hey, how was staying with him over break, anyways?”

Damn. Spoke too soon.

“It was…” you start, searching for the words. “Nice. Really chill, like in the cool way and also in the freezing-you-entire-ass-off way. His dad’s pretty nice, but I could also see where he gets his, y’know, essence from.”

“You know,” John starts, untangling his laptop’s power cord. “If you didn’t have anywhere to go, you could’ve stayed with me and Jade.” He says it matter of factly, not like he’s hurt, but you still feel bad anyway.

“Yeah… kind of did it all on impulse. Sorry, man.”

He just shrugs. “Well, going to DC was probably pretty cool, huh? I’d probably go too, if I were you!”

You show John the Polaroids you took and the pictures on your new camera. He laughs at some of them, marvels at others, tells you over and over how jealous he is that you got so much snow. With a roll of tape you hang up your favorites on the white brick wall of your dorm, right above your bed.

Some of them are landscapes, pictures of Seattle and DC and the small town in Maryland you stayed in. Others are of your friends, of John and Jade at the fair, of Rose and Kanaya at the cat cafe. You hesitate putting up pictures of Karkat, especially just him by himself. But you find a picture of him leveling you with a glare, the hint of a smile underneath it from where he sits across from you on the metro, the sun coming through the windows behind him.

Looking at it fills you with so much warmth that you can’t help but put it up with the others.

After that, you shoot Jade a text, figuring she’s probably busy getting settled in with her dog, and not yet wanting to go back to the room she shares with Rose. You swipe away a notification from Rose that Jade is here and open up Pesterchum on your phone.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering gardenGnostic [GG] at 11:38 --

TG: hey
GG: dave!!
GG: what’s up? :D
TG: nothing just saying hi and checkin in and shit since we all just got back
TG: how’re you
GG: im ok! getting bec settled in has been kinda stressful though
GG: there was soooo much more paperwork than i thought there’d be :(
TG: hey well itll all be worth it in the end right
GG: yeah!
GG: im so glad i decided to bring him here, hes gonna be so much help
TG: so when am i going to meet this abomination in the flesh
GG: abomination? >:o
TG: oh yknow just the hundred pound fluffy predator with razor sharp teeth
TG: hes totally not like a danger or anything haha right
GG: no dont be silly :P
GG: like yeah he could hurt people, but he never would in a million years!
TG: im gonna screencap this for my lawyers in the event this thing bites my ass off but okay
GG: he already met john and his dad and rose and karkat and EVERYONE was fine
TG: lmao he met karkat whatd he think of him
GG: karkat called him an apex predator
TG: see
GG: but he also said that if anyone could benefit from having him, itd be me >:)
TG: well i mean yeah not arguing there
TG: i guess ill just have to see for myself then huh
GG: yes! we should hang out soon!
GG: like just the three of us and stuff
TG: oh yeah
TG: should we do that one thing that we mentioned
GG: like with throwing stuff into the lake?
TG: yea i mean we could
TG: but we could also just have normal hangouts at first without getting into some existential fighting depression on a lakeside kinda shit
GG: hehe yeah
GG: well just text me when youre free and we can take bec around campus or something!
GG: for now i gotta go bc bec is trying to eat roses pillow o_o
GG: bye dave!
TG: alright sounds cool
TG: bye have fun with your hellhound
GG: hes not a hellhound! :P


There isn’t much to busy yourself with for the rest of the day, but the hours sweep by nonetheless. You talk with John, about nothing and everything, keeping the conversations light. You tell him more about all the people you met on the east coast, and he tells you about the fireworks he and Jade set off on new year’s eve.

It’s easy to get back into the rhythm of rooming with John. Parts of it are stilted, though, but you think maybe things have always been that way with you and him. It’s definitely different from staying with Karkat, who you’ve aired all your dirty laundry out to, who you’ve seen at the end of the day, after the front of all his anger and noise had dissipated. Who you’ve sat in front of with eyes unshielded, laughing, crying, being.

When it’s late and you’ve had your college student dinners, you hear a noise in the hallway that makes you jump out of your skin.

It’s the hollow sound of someone’s palm against the door, sharp and short and exactly what it’d sound like when you bro came to tell you to meet him on the roof. The familiarity puts you in a cold sweat.
John eyes you as you get up and peer out the door, only seeing another student, stack of papers in one hand and a roll of scotch tape in the other.

They smile awkwardly, gesturing at the door to a flyer for some kind of career fair, printed on yellow paper and held up with a frugal piece of tape.

You give an awkward nod back and close the door, hoping that John doesn’t notice how hard your heart is pounding right now, or how you’re not really sure you can even stand, the way your head is swimming.

“What was that?” he asks, and you don’t answer him, just busy yourself with putting on your shoes and grabbing your coat.

“I’m gonna go on a walk,” you tell him as you go, not waiting long enough to hear the confused statement he gives in response.

The air is sharp and cold when you step outside, but the ground is a solid comfort beneath you. You let yourself breathe a little bit. Out here, there are no strife notes to pin to doors, no bedrooms to hide away in, no rooftops to eventually have to brave. You know, you know you’re being a bit ridiculous, but your flight-or-fight response is telling you to fly, as far away as you possibly can.

You feel around in your pockets and are relieved to find your wallet. No such luck for your phone, though you don’t think you could talk to anyone right now anyway.

Even out here, you find your senses finely tuned to any sign of danger. Any sign that, as improbable as it is, your bro could be anywhere, waiting to ambush you. Shadows of trees swaying in the wind turn into his sword arm, the muffled footsteps of someone walking in the grass next to you turn into him trying to mask his approach.

You pull the hood of your red sweatshirt up over your head and press your glasses up high on the bridge of your nose. In the dark it’s hard to see, always is, but you’re used to it, and the lights along the walkways of the campus help.

You cut through the middle of a long lawn lined with tall, leafless trees until you make it to the street. Admittedly you’re not too familiar with this area, and have no clear destination in mind, either. You cross the street at a lull in the traffic instead of waiting for the light to change. On the other side are some shops, a Starbucks and a cafe right across from each other, and you wonder idly if Karkat ever comes over here for his caffeine fix.

Down another street you find a small, inconspicuous convenience store tucked in between a gyro grill and a Vietnamese restaurant. A cursory glance shows that there’s no one except the cashier and two bundled up girls in the drink aisle, so you step inside to take a breather.

You get a strange look from behind the counter and remember to pull off your hood. Back in Texas you used to go to the corner store a lot, one of the only things to do outside the apartment, really. You’d stock up on food for your paltry diet, and after enough visits, became something of friends with the cashier.

The painful familiarity of the situation just makes you nauseated and heavy-headed. You buy chips and ice cream sandwiches that were on sale mostly just for the sake of buying something, but also to cover up for you abruptly leaving John behind. He’s less likely to ask too many questions when you’ve gotten him his preferred treat from the freezer.

You wonder if there’ll ever be a time where you won’t try so hard to cover things up like this. If
there ever will be a time where there aren’t “things like this.”

When you’re sure there’s no one outside watching you as you leave, you start to head back a
different way that you came. You unwrap one of the sandwiches as you pass a post office, trying not
to mind the cold too much. There’s more than one sketchy alleyway that you cut through, and you
double around more city blocks than is necessary, just for the peace of mind.

There’s a mural of cherry blossoms against blue paint and graffiti on the back of a restaurant that says
“hentai” that you make a mental note to come back to. In the daylight, when you can actually get a
proper picture. When you come out of that alleyway, you realize you’re closer to your residence hall
than you thought you were.

You let out a sigh, surveying your surroundings once more. There’s a million reasons why you
should go back. To get out of the cold, for one thing, and also because you’re starving. But still,
you’re tempted to double back around another time, taking the longest route to your room you can
manage. You unwrap another one of the sandwiches, any idea you ever had about healthy eating
habits have gone out the window long ago.

If you were walking the streets of Houston, by now Bro would’ve gotten tired of your meandering
bullshit and just went home. You could always tell when he was gone. Right now, even though you
know he’s never even set foot in this state, you can’t yet shake the feeling he’s hiding in the
shadows, just down the street.

You feel in your pocket for a phone before remembering that you don’t have it, and end up
regaining your sense of direction by taking the wrong street, twice. There’s a good chance that if you
stay out here any longer, you’ll never find your way back. Another sigh leaves your lips.

You guess you should go back.

==> Be Karkat.

You wish you could say that after you met up with Jade, you went back to your room and spent the
rest of the day taking care of yourself.

The truth is, you didn’t go back right away. You trudged along around the outskirts of campus,
letting the cold settle in your bones even as you fought it off with cheap coffee. You picked up your
prescription and then walked for a very long time, your dysphoria like a heavy cloud. Feeling
daggers in your gut every time someone looked at you, but letting that happen, too. When you’re
feeling your worst there is nothing to do but feel worse, you suppose.

It’s the late afternoon when you get back. You’re more hungry than you are tired, but you choose the
nap anyway, sleeping fitfully in your binder despite knowing, all too well, the danger that comes
with that.

When you wake up, you take a long, too-hot shower. Your hair runs over your eyes as you stand
under the stream of water, turning thoughts over in your head. About what you are, who you are,
and for a sickly few minutes you convince yourself that all this time you’ve thought of yourself as a
boy, a young man, has just been the world’s most arduous prank.

It’s not the first time you’ve thought things like that, nor will it be the last. They come with thoughts
of every time you’ve ever been misgendered, every time you’ve ever misgendered yourself, and--

You shut off the water with a sharp turn of your wrist. You remember a time, months ago, when you
were walking to this very place. Dave told you later that he took you for a girl for a second, and for
some fucking reason, you didn’t rip his head off then and there.

You return to your room fuming, skin so hot you’re sure it’s dried itself off by the time you get all the way redressed. It occurs to you that there’s nothing stopping you this time from letting Dave know what the fuck is up. So you pull your laptop with you into bed, and pop several veins as you wait for it to wake back up and load Pesterchum.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 20:09 --

CG: HEY

You pause, not entirely sure how to go about this. For a second you consider just forgetting about it, but your anger lights up, and you clench your fists, and you deliver onto him your fury the best way you know how.

CG: HEY!!
TG: what
CG: FUCK YOU
TG: ?

Okay, maybe try that again.

CG: LOOK I KNOW THIS IS OUT OF THE FUCKING BLUE BUT I’M STILL MAD ABOUT SOMETHING FROM A LONG TIME AGO
CG: WHEN YOU WERE A GIANT FUCKING ASSHOLE TO ME AND SAID SOME SHIT THAT I REALLY WASN’T OKAY WITH
CG: BUT THAT I BRUSHED OFF BECAUSE, I DON’T KNOW? I WAS UNDER SOME DELUSION THAT I WAS TOTALLY ABOVE NOT SERVING CISSEXIST FUCKLORDS THEIR ASSES RAW ON A SILVER FUCKING PLATTER?
CG: OR MAYBE I JUST WASN’T RESIDING IN THE DYSPHORIA DUMPSTER FIRE BACK THEN THAT I CURRENTLY FIND MYSELF IN NOW?
CG: I GUESS I WAS ALSO AFRAID OF OUTING MYSELF, BUT THAT’S NOT REALLY AN ISSUE ANYMORE.
CG: WHATEVER, THE POINT IS
CG: I’M STILL FUCKING MAD ABOUT THAT TIME YOU JOKEPED THAT YOU THOUGHT I WAS A GIRL BECAUSE OF MY HEIGHT.
TG: oh
TG: i mean thats fair
CG: BECAUSE IT’S ACTUALLY A REALLY BIG INSECURITY OF MINE?
CG: AND NOT IN A “OH, HE JUST NEEDS A PEP TALK OR TWO ABOUT IT” KIND OF WAY?
CG: LIKE THERE ARE TIMES WHERE I’VE BEEN SO DYSPHORIC ABOUT MY HEIGHT THAT I’VE LITERALLY BEEN FUCKING SUICIDAL, SO, AGAIN, WITH *EMPHASIS*
CG: FUCK
CG: YOU
TG: i mean yeah i gathered at the time that i crossed some line like a real big serious fuckin line
TG: like no ifs ands or buts about it those were indeed some shitty words that came out of my mouth and youre well within your right to be upset with me
CG: YEAH, OF COURSE I FUCKING HAVE A RIGHT TO BE UPSET!!!
CG: AND I ALREADY KNOW THAT YOU KNOW THAT IT WAS BAD, I DON’T NEED ANOTHER HEARTFELT APOLOGY FROM YOU.
TG: so whats up then
CG: I DON’T KNOW, I JUST
CG: THERE’S ALL THESE LITTLE THINGS THAT ARE PILING UP ON TOP OF ME ALREADY FEELING LIKE SHIT THAT I JUST KEEP PICKING AT LIKE SOME NASTY SCAB.

CG: LIKE YEAH I COULD JUST LET THESE THINGS BE, BUT I COULD ALSO USE THEM TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL EVEN WORSE.

CG: BECAUSE FOR SOME REASON FEELING WORSE COMES MORE NATURALLY TO ME THAN FEELING BETTER.

CG: AND I DON’T EVEN KNOW HOW TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL BETTER ANYWAYS, SO OF COURSE THE NEXT LOGICAL STEP IS TAKING ALL MY ANGER OUT ON WHATEVER SORRY CHUM HAPPENS TO BE ONLINE AT THE TIME.

TG: well do you feel better after yelling at me

CG: THAT DEPENDS, ARE YOU BEING PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE RIGHT NOW?

TG: what no im being real as fuck man

TG: im asking because i genuinely do want you to feel better

CG: EVEN IF IT’S FROM YELLING AT YOU?

TG: well yeah if itd help

TG: i did a really shitty thing and id rather you unleash all your rage on me instead of staying quiet and letting it

TG: fuck whats the word

CG: ???

TG: like the thing that happens to wine and kimchi

CG: FERMENTATION?

TG: yes thank you

TG: instead of letting it ferment

TG: not that im one to talk but i think its always better to vocalize your issues and shit

CG: OKAY.. THAT’S..

CG: I MEAN, I GUESS I’VE NEVER HAD SOMEONE SAY THEY’D PREFER I YELL AT THEM.

CG: USUALLY PEOPLE JUST TELL ME TO SHUT THE FUCK UP.

TG: well then fuck em

CG: I DON’T KNOW, SOMETIMES THEY’RE PROBABLY RIGHT?

CG: I CAN GET SO WORKED UP I END UP JUST YELLING FOR THE SAKE OF YELLING, AND NOTHING CONSTRUCTIVE COMES OUT OF IT AT ALL.

CG: BUT I APPRECIATE YOU HEARING ME OUT ON THIS. EVEN THOUGH IT’S MONTHS AFTER THE FACT AND I’M PROBABLY COMING OFF AS A NEUROTIC ASSHOLE.

TG: the second thing

TG: and tbh youre really not coming off as anything like sometimes i randomly remember the shit i said to you when we first met and cringe so hard i turn inside out and my anus takes its rightful place in the spot where my mouth used to be

CG: THAT’S

CG: QUITE THE FUCKING MENTAL IMAGE, DAVE.

You can’t help laughing, in a quiet, heavy way that forces you to release some of the tension in your body that you didn’t know you were holding.

CG: ONE THING I DO WANT TO ASK, THOUGH.

CG: WHEN YOU SAID THAT, WAS IT BECAUSE YOU GENUINELY SAW ME AS A GIRL FOR A SECOND, OR WAS IT IN THAT SHITTY “TEASE GUYS BY CALLING THEM GIRLS” SORT OF THING?

TG: the second thing

TG: like a hundred percent my thought process back then was “joke with this guy the same way i
joke with john”
TG: but the “joke” wasn’t even really that funny at all and I’m kind of baffled that I ever thought it was
TG: like even that recently
TG: John and I have always had a thing where we call each other gay and like try to emasculate each other for the laughs I guess
TG: which is really only funny if you consider like gay and less masculine men inherently hilarious which I guess is kinda a thought that’s driven into us by society from a young age
TG: as probably a way to sorta invalidate and or dehumanize people like that idk
CG: UH
TG: not to say that that’s any kind of excuse at all I guess just kinda ruminating on the situation at large and how toxic a lot of the shit we’ve been exposed to is?
CG: YEAH, I MEAN, I DEFINITELY AGREE WITH YOU ON ALL OF THIS.
CG: THIS IS JUST. REALLY NOT THE AVENUE THAT I EXPECTED THIS CONVERSATION TO GO DOWN.
TG: haha yeah I guess me neither
TG: sorry I didn’t mean to like word barf on you my barely formulated thoughts on this shit when you’re probably the fuckin expert on the subject
TG: sitting there like “I can’t believe this fuckin loser is only just now figuring this out”
TG: this is just like me finally learning how to tie my own shoes in the fourth grade all over again
CG: WHAT?
TG: nothin
TG: hey btw do you want an ice cream sandwich
CG: ???????
TG: I bought like five of these things on impulse and I only realized the mistake I made after the second one
CG: UH, I’M FINE, THANKS.
TG: what
TG: bro the fuck do you mean you’re fine like unless you literally also just ate two ice cream sandwiches
TG: I’m comin over

==> Be Dave.

By the time you get back to your room, John is fast asleep, and the sudden, intense paranoia you felt earlier has all but melted away. The tiredness in your legs from walking so much says something of a job well done to you, familiar in how you used to shake Bro’s trail back in the day.

Quietly, you put away your food and change into more comfortable sweats and a t-shirt. John’s a heavy sleeper, and doesn’t stir at all when you turn your laptop back on, or even when you flick the light switch for a few seconds to find your phone.

There’s a couple messages from John asking where you are, and then one laughing at you for leaving your phone on the floor. There’s another from Karkat, just an all-caps “HEY” that was sent about thirty seconds ago.

What follows is a conversation that starts with your heart leaping into your throat and shame weighing down on you, at the idea that you hurt Karkat so callously before, at how fucking stupid you can be when you just run your mouth like that. You’re not expecting him to keep talking to you, or to even still accept your apology. You’re also not expecting the word vomit that you end up spewing about society and homophobia, and so you quickly grasp for any kind of change in conversation.
Barging into his room armed with ice cream sandwiches is probably a good idea, you think.

He opens the door two seconds after you knock, surprised and trying to hide his smile under a glare.

“You actually fucking came over here,” he says, plainly, and you only shrug.

“Brought you this, too,” you say, offering the ice cream to him. He takes it, carefully, and settles you with a look.

“You sucking up to me?” He turns around and leaves the door open, which you take as invitation to step inside. You close the door behind you.

“I’m trying to be nice.”

He sits down cross-legged on his bed, wearing a university hoodie and a pair of black boxers. He looks... tired, like he’s had a hell of a day, and you feel a little bad that you hadn’t checked in with him earlier. His hair is wet, and there’s faint scars on his legs that you recognized one morning in Maryland, but just like then, you don’t dare point them out.

“You’re trying to get on my good side,” he says, turning over the plastic packaging of the sandwich in his hands.

“It’s a good place to be,” you tell him, making your ass comfy where you lean against his desk. “I mean, I’d rather be there than be seated in the ‘people Karkat hates’ arena. Ain’t no fuckin’ wifi, and every night we have to have a deathmatch with the personification of one of your weird, tangent-filled diatribes.”

“You talk like you’ve ever been there,” he says, and lets out a dramatic sigh, complete with an eye roll. “Like I could ever actually hate your dumb ass.”

You can’t help the smile that spreads on your face. Only Karkat could call you a dumbass as a roundabout way of complimenting you.

“How’s your first day back been?” you ask, changing the subject.

“Fucking awful,” he says solemnly, running his nail along a jagged edge of plastic, stilling toying with it instead of just opening it up. “Been one of the worst days I’ve had in awhile.”

There’s an initial spark of surprise that comes up when he answers honestly, openly, but it quickly fades. “I’m sorry,” is all you manage to say.

“It’s no one’s fault,” he says. “Just how it is sometimes.”

“Yeah...” you murmur, more of a faint noise of agreement, if anything.

He looks down again as a silence settles in, and you have the desperate urge to break it.

“Someone graffitied the word ‘hentai’ on the back of one of the restaurants outside campus.”

He snorts, honest to god snorts, and buries his face into his hands as he mumbles something to the tune of “what the fuck, Dave?”

“I’m serious,” you say, taming your own laughter. “I’ll show you tomorrow. It’s right next to a Well’s Fargo.”

“Of all the sights we could see in Seattle,” he laughs. “And you want to show me hentai graffiti?”
“It’s just the word,” you tell him. “But we could probably find that, too, if we look around.”

“Yeah, and while we’re at it, you’ll show me every spray painted phallus in the city, too?”

“We’ll make it a dick excursion,” you say, drawing another laugh from him. “Pack a lunch, have us a penis picnic.”

“Dave, oh my god,” he says, covering his face again. “Penis picnic, really?”

“Scrotum safari,” you mumble. “A knob jaunt.”

He tears his hands away, laughing. “Oh my god, stop!”

“It was your idea!”

Karkat laughs again, trying his absolute hardest to keep a straight face, but you’re better than him at it, and every time he looks at you he breaks.

“Fuck you,” he says, hiding his flushed face behind his hands, and jesus christ, he’s fucking giggling now. You can’t stop yourself from smiling.

“What?” he asks you when he notices, trying to glare the question at you but utterly failing to do so.

You don’t answer, just stare at him for a few seconds, hiding your grin and rising blush behind your hand because he’s being so absolutely goddamn cute right now. You’re afraid that if you open your mouth, you’ll say either that or something equally as mortifying out loud.

That just gets him to throw one of his pillows at you. It hits you softly, and you toss it back at his feet.

“Eat your sandwich,” you tell him, bracing yourself in case he throws the pillow back at you. “Before it melts.”

He tears the wrapper open with his teeth and looks right at you as he takes the first bite. “Happy now?”

“Hell yeah, dude. I’m chuffed as fuck.”

You stand up from the desk, lingering, just a bit. Something feels odd about just leaving now, after all the time spent in the same space with him over break. You don’t want to go back to your room right away, you want to stay here and spend the entire night with him, just making him laugh.

“I gotta… get back,” you say. “First day of class tomorrow, gotta get some sleep.”

“You too,” he says, mouth full of ice cream. He swallows. “See you tomorrow?”

You nod and open up the door, but before you can step outside, he speaks up again.

“And thanks, by the way. For… you know.” His voice is uncharacteristically small, and he doesn’t really look at you when he speaks.

“Yeah man, no problem,” you step outside and start to shut the door, but stop short. “Are we cool?”

“You’re cool,” he grins, and you smile back at him as you leave.

You float back to your own room, to the door you always lock even if you’re only stepping out for a
minute, to your messy space that John likes to nag you about, when he’s not asleep or making a mess of his own. When you step inside, you toss your shades onto your nightstand and flop face-first onto your bed.

And for reasons you don’t know if you really want to pinpoint, but not in a way that you think feels bad, your heart races, thumping loud and hard against your chest.

You smile into your pillow. No, you don’t think this feels bad at all.

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter will break 100k of this massive slow burn hell fic but listen. dont touch that dial, stay tuned, etc. chapter 12 will be a doozy.

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