**Beyond The Stars**

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**Beyond The Stars**

by corruptedkid

**Summary**

Karkat Vantas was a mutant. Rejected by the universe for his cherry blood, he searched for a way, any way, to show everyone that he was worth noticing. He thought the invasion would be the perfect opportunity. He would kill some humans, get some glory, and prove himself to be more than a freak. What could go wrong?

Dave Strider was just a teenager. With an abusive brother and not much else, he kept himself moving, leaping from one distraction to the next. He just wanted something to change.

They would both get what they wanted, but in a way neither of them would have ever seen coming.

**Notes**

Buckle up kiddies, this is gonna be a long and fun ride.
I've tagged most of the background relationships in this fic, but here's the list in case they weren't clear: Karkat/Kanaya (pale), Eridan/Sollux (black), hints of Eridan/Vriska (black) and John/Terezi (black), as well as Rose/Kanaya. Some of these will be mentioned often, others referenced once and then forgotten. But they are background, and this fic is absolutely about davekat.

I'll try to shoot for weekly updates, but they may occasionally slip to bi-weekly.

Chapters will alternate between Karkat and Dave.

Please enjoy!
"Remember to live, 'cause you're gonna be thrilled to death
When the stars collide and your eyes grow wide
Take it in with your breath against the glass!"

-Alligator Sky, Owl City

Karkat never thought he’d actually be able to make it.

From the moment he was hatched and realized what his blood color meant, the odds had been stacked against him. Fighting through the trials, snagging a lusus on pure chance, avoiding the imperial drones… It had all seemed too good to be true. The threat of culling hung constantly over his shoulder, and whenever he got too cocky, he would have to look back and give himself a wake-up call.

He wasn’t meant to survive.

But somehow, he kept surviving.

He was lucky enough to make friends who (mostly) didn’t care about the caste system. He was even luckier that said friends were skilled enough to hide him. He lived undercover, claiming maroon blood, and for seven sweeps, no one was the wiser.

It wasn’t until the draft that things got tough. The drones came a-knocking and scooped him away, and before he knew it, he had been dumped in an imperial ship beside thousands of other young trolls. They were given a pep talk and a uniform, and then they were locked into the ship that would be their new home.

For the next sweep, they would be drilled, ranked, and drilled again. They existed to train. They would be Alternia’s perfect killing machines, and the star system they were set out to conquer would never know what had hit it!

In theory, it was all Karkat had ever dreamed of. Fighting for the glory of his planet, earning respect and rising through the ranks of the imperial fleet, maybe even high enough to become a threshecutioner.

It would’ve been the perfect opportunity, if it weren’t for the mutant red blood running through his veins. He could never be a threshecutioner. He could never be anything more than a soldier, for fear, for constant fear.

So, there he was. Eight sweeps old and flying through galaxies. There was only one window in his sector of the ship, in the communal block. When he wasn’t training, eating, or talking with his friends, Karkat would spend hours staring out into the black depths of outer space. If he squinted, he could see stars in the distance. Planets and systems ripe for the conquering. Constellations, patterns given names. Proverbial stars in which the fates scrawled the destinies of all life.

They were all out there, somewhere. His own destiny was written just like anyone else’s. He didn’t
need to see it, he already knew what it would say.

But if Karkat kept looking, maybe he could find a way past it. Maybe he could break away, and travel beyond the stars to paradise.

Maybe out there, somewhere, there was a place where the universe would deem him worthy to live.

***

-- caligulasAquarium [CA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

CA: kar

CA: kar

CA: kar answer already cod damnit

CG: HOLY FUCK, ERIDAN. CHILL OUT. I’M HERE.

CG: WHAT’S HAPPENING.

CG: YOU SOUND A LITTLE MORE DESPERATE TO TALK TO ME THAN USUAL.

CA: ha fuckin ha

CA: did you hear the wword

CG: NO. WHEN THE DRONES CAME AROUND BENEVOLENTLY DISPENSING “THE WWORD,” I WAS SHOCKINGLY OVERLOOKED.

CA: gee lets all play make fun of eridans quirk

CA: havvent heard THAT one before

CA: the wword is wwere landin soon, dipshit

CG: WAIT.

CG: WAIT, ARE YOU SERIOUS?

CA: i think theyre tellin all the high rankin officers first so all you foot soldiers dont get antsy

CA: but yeah wwere set to touch down in a few hours

CG: HOLY SHIT.

CG: I...

CG: IT DOESN’T EVEN FEEL REAL. I’VE SPENT SO LONG IN THIS CABIN-FEVER INDUCING HELLHOLE... I’VE FORGOTTEN WHAT NON-MUNICIPALLY DISTRIBUTED FOOD TASTES LIKE. I’VE FORGOTTEN WHAT IT’S LIKE TO BREATHE AIR THAT HASN’T BEEN FILTERED THROUGH SOMEONE ELSE’S RESPIRATORY SYSTEM FIFTY TIMES. I HAVEN’T HEARD THE SOUND OF THE FEATHERBEASTS SINGING IN SWEEPS!

CG: YOU KNOW WHAT THOUGH, THIS STUFFY ASSHOLE ATMOSPHERE HAS BECOME WHAT’S FAMILIAR TO ME.
CG: MAYBE I’LL LEARN TO MISS THIS PLACE.

CG: JUST KIDDING THAT WAS THE WORST FUCKING JOKE I’VE EVER TOLD.

CG: THE PLANET WE’RE HEADED TO COULD BE MADE OF LITERAL FUCKING HOOFBEAST FECES AND IT WOULD BE LESS DESPICABLE THAN THIS PLACE.

CG: IT ISN’T MADE OF HOOFBEAST FECES THOUGH, THANK GOD. IT DOESN’T ACTUALLY SEEM THAT BAD.

CA: yeah

CA: i think this is wwhy they told the high rankin officers first

CG: SHUT THE FUCK UP.

CG: CAN YOU AT LEAST PRETEND TO BE EXCITED? LIKE, DOES THIS REALLY NOT BRING ANY JOY TO YOUR COLLAPSING AND EXPANDING BLADDER BASED AQUATIC VASCULAR SYSTEM?

CG: I’LL TYPE SLOWLY SO YOU’LL UNDERSTAND.

CG: WE.

CG: ARE.

CG: GETTING.

CG: OFF.

CG: THIS.

CG: SHIP.

CA: i am excited im just not paradin it about like a fuckin emotional wiggler

CG: OH.

CG: OH, ERIDAN, YOU WOUND ME. THESE BARBS, THEY ARE TOO SHARP.

CA: just sayin man not evverybody is such a fuckin fanatic for this new planet as you are

CG: WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT.

CA: you learned their language

CA: or part of one of them at least

CG: WHAT, SO I NEED TO BE CRUCIFIED FOR HAVING A LITTLE CROSS-CULTURAL INTEREST? THIS SHIP GETS BORING, NEED I REMIND YOU.

CA: okay yeah but

CA: you wwatched their movvies

CA: you wwatched their movvies kar that aint normal
CG: ARE YOU FUCKING SHITTING ME THIS PLANET HAS A VERSION OF WILL SMITH HOW COULD I NOT WATCH THEIR MOVIES.

CA: wwhatever man keep tellin yourself that

CA: ill see you at docking maybe

CA: hope youre in my squadron

CG: WAIT, WHAT?

CA: theyre dividin us into groups for battle

CA: ive been tryin to get you into my group so you dont havve to wwoorry about your blood or anythin but i dunno howw wwell its goin

CA: i gotta go sea you later kar

-- caligulasAquarium [CA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

Karkat closed his husktop with a sigh.

Now that he thought of it, the highbloods had been looking awfully smug at evening mealtime. He guessed this must be why.

He turned the idea over in his head. He would finally be able to walk down the landing board, breathe the air of a planet that was not his own, and set his blaster to kill mode. It would be fucking glorious. But he couldn’t believe it was really happening.

Was he really about to leave? To finally escape the watchful eye of the drones, if but for a moment?

Karkat hoped so. But the battle posed a problem; if he was injured, and someone else saw his blood, it would be game over. Yet again, his fate lay with his friends. Karkat had to be in a battle group with someone he knew. It was his only chance.

He opened his husktop.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began trolling terminallyCapricious [TC] --

CG: I ASSUME YOU’RE A HIGH ENOUGH RANK THAT THEY’VE TOLD YOU THE NEWS.

TC: fOr SuRe mY bRoThEr

TC: hOnK HoNk :o)

CG: OKAY, GOOD. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW THEY’RE DIVIDING THE SQUADRONS?

TC: uHhH

TC: wAiT wHaT?

TC: yOu lOsT mE tHeRe BrO

CG: RIGHT.
CG: OF COURSE, I SHOULD NEVER HAVE ASSUMED YOU ACTUALLY KNEW WHAT I MEANT.

CG: I’M TALKING ABOUT THE FACT THAT WE’RE LANDING SOON, YOU OBTUSE PIECE OF FUCK, AND THEY’RE GOING TO BE SEPARATING US. ERI DAN LEFT BEFORE HE TOLD ME ANYTHING MORE, BUT THIS IS BAD FUCKING NEWS FOR ME.

CG: SO. HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT THAT AT ALL.

TC: oH yEaH tHeY dId sAy SoMeThInG aBoUT tHaT

CG: I’M GOING TO CUT YOU OFF RIGHT THERE BEFORE YOU SAY SOMETHING ABOUT MIRACLES.

CG: JUDGING BY YOUR RANK AND BLOOD COLOR, I’M ASSUMING YOU’LL BE ONE OF THE SQUADRON LEADERS. HELL IF I KNOW THOUGH. MAYBE THE HIGHER-UPS TOOK INTO ACCOUNT YOUR SOPOR HABITS AND YOU’LL JUST BE A SOLDIER LIKE ME.

CG: ANYWAY. I NEED TO END UP ON A TEAM WITH AT LEAST ONE PERSON I KNOW, OR I’M CULLED. EVEN VRISKA WOULD BE A RELIEF AT THIS POINT. I’M STARTING TO GET A LITTLE NERVOUS.

TC: aW bRo DoNt bE gErTiN yOuR fEaRs On :

TC: i HaVeNt SeEn YoU iN aLl oF fOrEvEr WhY dOnT yOu CoMe OvEr?

CG: YOU…

CG: I MEAN, I CAN DO THAT? I DIDN’T THINK I HAD CLEARANCE.

TC: yOu CaN dO wHaTeVeR yOu wAnT oN oRdErS fRoM mE bRo

CG: DO YOU MEAN TO FUCKING TELL ME I COULD HAVE VISITED ANY OF MY FRIENDS OVER THE PAST SWEEP IF I JUST ACTED LIKE THEY HAD ORDERED ME TO.

TC: llfE’s jUsT a MiRaClE llKe tHaT :)

CG: OKAY, TIME TO STOP TALKING.

CG: WHAT SECTOR ARE YOU IN?

TC: uHhHhH

TC: hOID oN i gOt ThIs

TC: sEcToR a WiNg 2? SoMe WiCkEd ShIt LiKe ThAt hAhAhA

TC: l0oK fOr ThE hAlLwAy WiTh AlL tHe PuRpLeS aNd ThE rAiNbOwS

CG: THAT’S MILDLY TERRIFYING BUT OKAY. I’LL SEE IF I CAN GET THERE.

TC:  :]
CG: WAIT HOLY SHIT I JUST HAD A THOUGHT.

CG: DO YOU

CG: DO YOU HAVE A WINDOW OVER THERE?

TC: hEll yEyAh mOtHeRfUcKeR wE gOt WaLl LeNgTh WiNdOwS All up iN tHiS bltCh!

CG: CAN YOU SEE THE NEW PLANET??

TC: hOlD uP lEt mE lOoK

TC: yEyAh tHeReS a PrEtTy BlUe AnD gReEn mOtHeRfUcKeR gEtTiN iTs ChIlL oUt ThErE

TC: hOnK

CG: I’M COMING OVER.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased trolling terminallyCapricious [TC] --

Karkat threw his husktop to the side and grabbed his uniform. He would be demoted if seen wandering the halls without it on. He pulled the jacket on over his long-sleeved black shirt, and changed his pants before heading out the door.

Outside his respiteblock was the communal block, where any trolls with free time could lounge around and do jack shit. Now that they had spent so long on the ship, the drones had been getting lax with their schedules; many of the soldiers ended up sitting in the communal block on their husktops for hours on end. Today must have been a training day for some of the midbloods. As Karkat walked through the open area it was much less populated than was typical, and he thanked his lucky stars for that. Though with orders from Gamzee he could arguably go anywhere he wanted, he still didn’t want to get hassled by some random troll when they saw him heading into the highbloods’ sector.

He passed through the block and to the corridor beyond with no confrontation. It was eerily quiet, but with an underlying sense of anticipation. Behind the walls, all the staff would be working to prepare for docking. Karkat shivered.

At the exit to his sector, a drone was stationed. Karkat swallowed hard as he approached it.

“I’m going to Sector A, Wing Two,” he said cautiously. “Official orders from Gamzee Makara.”

The drone eyed him with mechanical disinterest. There was a quiet whirl as something inside it activated, and after a moment, it trudged to the side to allow Karkat through.

He walked as quickly as he could without seeming suspicious.

It was a long way to the highbloods’ part of the ship, and Karkat had never actually been there. But if they could see the planet ahead, they must have been right at the front, in the bow. He could feel the hall curve to the right as he walked. He trailed his fingers along the wall. Layers and layers of construction that began there and ended outside were all that protected him from the endless vacuum of space.

There was another drone stationed at the entrance to Sector Two.

Karkat stated his business, and this one took a bit longer to deem him harmless, but moved aside in the end. Behind it, the corridor split into two paths. One was paved with a carpet of plush violet, and the other with a slightly rougher one of deep purple.
The purple hall had what Karkat prayed was rainbow paint splattered across the walls and floor.

He started down it, giving the colored stains in the carpet a wide berth. After a while, doors began to appear, each with a symbol carved into them. He could heard laughter coming from behind some of them, but it was low and sinister, rather than cheerful. There was the occasional honking noise. Karkat shivered again and continued on until he spied a familiar mark.

Before he could even knock, the door swung open and he was being lifted high into the air.

“What the fuck is up, my brother?” Gamzee squeezed Karkat tightly.

“Gamzee, put me down right this second or I swear to God I will dump the contents of your recuperacoon out into the void.”

Gamzee set his friend down. Once Karkat was on the ground, he was significantly shorter than the other troll. He actually had to look up to make eye contact.

“Well, fuck. I didn’t think you could get any taller,” he grumbled.

“Aw, bro, don’t be givin’ up on your potential.” Gamzee ruffled his hair. “There’s always a miracle in store. Maybe you’ll all up and shoot up higher than me!”

Karkat stalked into Gamzee’s respiteblock. “Gamzee, nothing can be higher than you. If the universe had an award for ‘most stoned and also tallest,’ you’d win it. You’d be the crowning champion of being stoned and tall, and you would hold that title for the rest of your freakishly extended lifespan.”

“Man, I motherfucking missed you,” Gamzee laughed.

Karkat didn’t respond. He was busy staring in shock out the window that encompassed most of Gamzee’s wall.

“You have one of these in your block?” he whispered. “When you said you had a window, I thought you meant in the communal area. This is…”

Gamzee came to stand beside him, gazing out contentedly. “Pretty motherfuckin’ chill view, right?”

“Better than chill, this is fucking amazing.” Karkat took a step closer to the thick glass and pressed a hand to it. The surface was slightly curved as to blend smoothly with the exterior of the ship, and if he leaned out far enough, he almost felt like he could fall through. It was a dizzying sensation.

“Where’s the planet?” he asked.

Gamzee did not speak, merely pointing a little ways to the right. Karkat followed his gaze, and his eyes landed on something he had never seen before.

So, that was Earth.

It looked kind of weird. There was only a singular pale moon instead of two colored ones. And it was smaller than Alternia, if Karkat recalled correctly. One of many ways in which the two planets differed. This one had vast blue oceans flooding across most of its surface, only confined by swatches of green and brown land. There was a cap of white at each pole, and thick clouds obscured a good percentage of the view. Nothing like Alternia’s endless gray landscape and dull waters.

But the two were alike in that somewhere, down on their native grounds, they held life.

Humans were an interesting species, Karkat had to admit. Or, at least, they seemed to have a good
grasp of romance and how to translate it to film. He had originally discovered their archive of movies while kicking around on his husktop one day. Apparently the drones had made much of Earth’s internet available, should any troll want to make use of it.

Karkat, to his knowledge, was the only one to make use of it.

It had started with one movie. He had turned it on out of sheer boredom. But the main focus of the movie was a flushed couple, and no other quadrants came into play at all. It was too shitty to keep watching. So he had picked another, only to encounter the same problem.

After doing a bit of research, he found that the species known as “humans” had only one quadrant. Fucking aliens. After that he had dismissed them as a race, and refused anything to do with them.

Until he got so bored wandering around the ship that he accepted defeat and turned his husktop back on.

The appearances and culture of the human race were strange, and Karkat didn’t wonder why the Condesce had decided they needed to be eradicated. But he did make an effort to understand them. It was the least he could do before he helped to slaughter them all. If he didn’t absorb their film history for posterity, who would?

The movies weren’t so bad, once you got used to the singular quadrant system. They were actually pretty okay. Karkat wouldn’t go so far as to call them “good,” but watching them didn’t make him want to projectile vomit. That was better than he could say of some Alternian works. And the humans, though strange, seemed to have some measure of intelligence. They were docile, for the most part, and simple in their thought processes, but not stone cold dumb. They were not the worst race ever to be ejected from the universe’s glistening asshole.

Not to say he didn’t loathe them. He did. He hated every stinking human that had ever been “born” with a burning passion, and he couldn’t wait to watch their fragile pink bodies dropping to the ground by the thousand. It was his duty as a troll to feel this way, and he accepted it readily.

The fact that they all wore their candy red blood on their sleeves didn’t help their case, either. God. Being a mutant was something to be ashamed of, and no matter how his friends told him otherwise, that was something Karkat knew. These humans had no sense of decency.

“What’s up, bro?” Gamzee said, jolting Karkat from his hateful reverie.

He scowled. “I’m excited to land.”

Gamzee raised his eyebrows. “You don’t look too motherfuckin’ excited. Actually, you look like you’re all up and about to go off on a murder spree.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be the same thing?” Karkat snapped.

Gamzee nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, I guess that’s what some people’d motherfuckin’ want. But you can’t be basin’ your whole self on what other people want for you. It’s okay to not want to kill people.”

Karkat shuffled his feet uncomfortably. “I never said I don’t want to kill anyone, where the fuck did you get that idea? I’m just as trigger-happy as everyone else here. Every living being on this new planet can choke on my bulge for all I care.”

Gamzee’s eyes closed as he nodded. “That’s okay too. Do whatever feels natural to you, bro. Just don’t motherfuckin’ force anything.”
Karkat sighed and turned his gaze back to Earth.

The planet was so weird-looking, it was almost a little bit beautiful.

“All soldiers report to the deck,” an automated voice blared. Karkat jumped. “All soldiers and officers report to the deck.”

Gamzee tilted his head to listen. “Sounds like… we should be headin’ on up to the deck. C’mon.”

He scooped Karkat into his arms, only to drop him again when the smaller troll began squirming uncontrollably. “Don’t fucking carry me, douchespigot, I can walk fine on my own.”

Karkat smoothed out his uniform and glared at Gamzee before stepping out into the hall.

A steady stream of purple-bloods was migrating down the hall, and Karkat grabbed onto the back of Gamzee’s jacket to avoid being swept away. They moved with the group down the halls, up the stairs, and through to the ship’s main deck. Waiting for them was their supervisor.

An intimidating violet-blood female, she stood on a stage-like platform and glared at the soldiers beginning to file in. Karkat moved behind Gamzee. He tried to look through the crowd for any of his friends, but he couldn’t see over the mass of purple-bloods. Stupid highblood height genes. Stupid incredibly intimidating trolls and their creepy smiles…

The quiet hum of a crowd began to build and fill the block. “Gamzee,” Karkat hissed. “Can you see anyone we know?”

Gamze surveyed the crowd. “Mmm… Yeah.”

“Who?”

“I see Tavbro.” Gamzee smiled down at Karkat, who raised his eyebrows.

“Huh. I’m surprised he survived the training process. Anyone else?”

“Well, I see little meowbeast girl over there with, uh… I forgot his name.”

“Equius?”

“Motherfuck, yeah.” Gamzee turned around. “And there’s your buddy over with the officers.”

Karkat stood on his tiptoes, but to no avail. He couldn’t see anything, god damnit! “Eridan? Where is he?”

Gamzee put his hands beneath Karkat’s arms and lifted him into the air. “This better?”

“No, that is NOT BETTER PUT ME THE FUCK DOWN.”

Karkat stumbled as he landed back on his feet. His face felt hot as he avoided the amused stares of the trolls around him. Oh, fuck, _fuck_ he couldn’t blush or his blood would show, and he knew for a fact that those around him would not hesitate to cull him on the spot. Purple-bloods had a notorious reputation for violence and extremism. Gamzee was probably the only harmless one in existence.

“I assume you all know what is ahead,” their supervisor called. The chatter died out in a single moment, and the sudden silence left Karkat’s hear ducts ringing. “Even your officers are utter shit at keeping secrets, so I will proceed with the assumption that you all know we are about to land. But before that can happen, you will need to be divided into groups, as we will be initiating invasion the
“Each group will have a leader and five foot soldiers. The blood colors of your teammates may vary wildly, but you will all have a highblood officer to lead you. I will now read out the names of the trolls who have been chosen to lead squadrons. God knows there are far too many of you, so this will take a long fucking time, but you’d better keep your chitinous windholes clamped shut until I’m done or I’ll personally have you culled. If I call your name, come up here and wait onstage.” She pulled out a long sheet and began to read off names. “Nechta Caspan. Corvus Nekima. Kaslin Tespor. Lestra Bellos. Gamzee Makara.”

Gamzee grinned as Karkat gave him a light punch in the arm. As he walked up to the stage, the crowd parted for him, and he ambled up the steps with his hands shoved casually into his pockets. He looked like an idiot, slouching there next to all the other, perfectly attentive officers, and it was fucking beautiful. Karkat would shed drops of dismay fluid if they weren’t red-tinted enough to give him away.

But without his friend to stand beneath, Karkat was left feeling vulnerable surrounded by the gigantic highbloods. Their reputation for violence was again brought to mind as one gave him a toothy smirk. He stooped down a little, as to be smaller and less noticeable, and began to weave his way through the sea of bodies.

Once he broke away from the mass of highbloods and entered the crowd made up of mostly middle hues, he started to feel better. These people were shorter and much less threatening. In fact, one particular face was the least threatening thing he could think of. He made his way over as fast as he could. As she caught sight of him, her face broke into a wide smile.

“Hello, Karkat.”

“Hey, Kanaya.” Karkat pulled her into a hug, lingering a moment before letting her go. “Now isn’t exactly the time for heartfelt reunions,” he whispered. “But I missed you like fuck.”

Kanaya patted his back gently. “A curse be upon all drones for dividing their keep by blood color.”

Karkat smiled as he turned back towards the stage to listen. Being surrounded by so many dangers was stressful, but with Kanaya, it became a little easier. They had never made their relationship official, but everyone in a twenty foot radius knew they were pale as hell. She put her hand on his arm as they listened to the supervisor drone on with her list of names.

“Eridan Ampora.”

Karkat watched as Eridan ascended the stairs and took his place next to the other leaders. His posture was regal, and he looked down on the crowd with an arrogant sneer befitting of a violet-blood such as himself.

Gamzee or Eridan. Having a friend in his group would help Karkat exponentially, but having a friend as his leader would practically erase his struggle. He crossed his fingers and hoped. He even sent a little message out to the clown gods Gamzee always rambled about. Please, mirthful messiahs, if you’re real, give me this one fucking favor and let me be with someone I know. I’ll never ask for anything again. He left out the part where he wouldn’t be asking again because the mirthful messiahs were shitty delusions made up by clowns high on sopor slime.

The supervisor tore her sheet in half with a loud ripping noise, and Karkat looked up from his prayer. “That’s it,” she announced. “Each leader has a list of trolls who will be on their teams. They’re in charge of reading it, not me, so knock yourselves out.” She retreated to the back of the stage and
took a seat on a chair that had been brought up for her by a lowblood.

Eridan moved to center stage to go first, and no one dared to question his air of confidence. “Sollux Captor,” he called. Karkat sniggered. Eridan, leading Sollux? That squad would be having a fun time.

“Terezi Pyrope.” Karkat blinked as the blind girl skipped out from the crowd to join Eridan and Sollux. He hadn’t seen her in the crowd, but he wished he had. They probably wouldn’t get to speak again for a very long time.

“Vriska Serket.” Ooh. Vriska, an old flame of Eridan’s, and Sollux, a possible new one. Karkat would have to get the juicy details from him later on.

“Kanaya Maryam.”

Karkat’s pump biscuit lept into his throat.

“I’m sorry,” Kanaya murmured. “But this is where I must leave you.” She squeezed Karkat’s hand before moving up to join her new squadron. As she left, the crowd around him instantly seemed to swell. He steadied his breathing as best he could and waited for Eridan to read the final name.

“Karkat Vantas.”

Holy shit on a fuckstick.

Not a team with someone he knew, a team made of only people he knew! He was safe! As long as he didn’t fuck up in battle, he was safe, and he was going to live!

Karkat forced himself forward, and approached the stage as if in a dream. Eridan smiled briefly as Karkat fell in line, and then the new team filed down the steps together. A drone appeared by their side and directed them into a small block. Several panels made up one wall. Another was composed of what looked thrillingly like a door.

“You may now commence squadron activity,” the drone addressed Eridan. Its robotic voice held no emotion, and as soon as it was finished speaking, it zoomed away. When it did, Eridan’s regal attitude crumbled. He looked exhausted.

“Thank fuckin’ cod.”

Kanaya threw her arms around Karkat, and he would be lying if he said a little bit of dismay fluid didn’t leak from his lookstubs, he was so relieved. Terezi leaped forward to run her tongue along his face, and before he knew it, he was surrounded by his friends.

“Do you know how fucking hard it wath to coordinate thith?” Sollux was complaining. “Imperial firewallth are no trick, I’m telling you. Getting uth all together wath the biggetht job I’ve ever taken on and I didn’t even get paid for it, tho you’d better be fucking grateful.”

“Don’t act like I had no part in it,” Eridan objected. “You wouldn’t have gotten anything done if I didn’t give you those access codes—”

“Shut up, you revolting bulgemanglers,” Karkat choked. “I’m so fucking glad to see all of you.”

“Stop being so emotional, it’s making you taste all sappy.” Terezi stuck out her tongue.

“I thought I was going to end up on a team full of strangers who would kill me the second I got cut!”
“And instead, you ended up on a team of pansies who won’t kill anybody for fear it’ll hurt their feelings,” Vriska grumbled. “God. What I wouldn’t give to be in a different squad.” Terezi papped her on the cheek.

“Shush, you, don’t be so rude. You’ve got me to kill people with.”

“I do hate to interrupt this long overdue reunion, but are we not meant to be ‘commencing squadron activity,’ whatever that means?” said Kanaya.

Eridan ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Nah, it’s whatever. That just means we introduce ourselves and figure out how we’ll be best at fighting together. We already know all that stuff.”

“Good,” Sollux said. “All the more time to talk. I haven’t heard a thingle fucking thank you from anyone, and I’m not going to take a thingle thtep on that planet until I hear at leasth two.”

“Thank you, Sollux,” Karkat and Kanaya said in unison. They looked at each other and blushed.

“Get a block, you two,” Vriska snorted.

“Oh, there’s one more thing we have to do,” Eridan said suddenly. He pressed a button in the wall, and one of its panels flipped to reveal a rack of outfits. They were similar in design to the uniforms Karkat had become accustomed to, but instead of having two pieces, a jacket and pants, they were full-body suits. There were grey pads sewn into the black fabric along the limbs and torso. They ended at the joints, and then began again past them. Karkat poked one of the pads. It was as hard as a rock, but the black cloth around it was cool and flexible.

“This must be the work of Imperial engineering,” Kanaya noted as she touched the stiff fabric. “Blaster-proof, I expect.”

“They’re battle armor,” said Eridan. “Put them on, we’re going to need them soon. Remember what the lady said? We’re starting to invade the second we land.” He pushed another button, and a set of helmets emerged beside the armor. “These have wireless communicators built in, so if we get separated, we can find each other.”

Karkat put one on. It was less bulky than it appeared, and when he slipped the visor down over his lookstubs, he found the clear material easy to see through.

“That’ll display thermal vision,” Eridan said, pointing at the visor. “It has a few different settings you can use to see.” He sounded pleased with himself, explaining all the equipment the others could make no sense of. “Now get changed.”

Karkat shrugged off his uniform jacket, and, after a moment of hesitation, decided to leave his pants on underneath the armor. Terezi had made a different decision, and Karkat caught a glimpse of a pair of boxers adorned with brightly colored dragons before she was fully clothed.

He slipped on the armor as quickly as he could. It fit him snugly, but not in an uncomfortable way. He held out his arms, testing the fit, and the fabric stretched with his movement. He could see Kanaya nodding in approval. On her uniform’s chest, he noticed, was her symbol, stitched in green. He looked down.

There was his own, stitched in gray. He breathed a sigh of relief. There wasn’t a trace of red on him, unless you counted the hot pink logo of Her Imperious Condescension on the side of his helmet.

“Commencing landing mode,” the same automated voice that had bid them to the deck now informed them.
A set of handles popped out of the walls, and Karkat grabbed onto one as the ship began to vibrate. He felt the floor tilt beneath his feet, and he grabbed Kanaya’s free hand with his.

“One more thing!” Eridan shouted over the rising roar of the engines. He snatched a blaster from the uniform rack and tossed it to Karkat. “Everybody get a weapon!”

There was a scramble to receive a gun before the floor tilted too sharply. The vibrations had increased to shaking, and Karkat bit down on his tongue by mistake. Hot blood filled his mouth, and spat it out. It landed on the floor and began to run, a trickle of bright, accusatory red.

Soon, he would carve out rivers of red, but the blood would not be his own.

The ship settled.

They were on Earth.

And as one wall opened to reveal a planet teeming with life, Karkat knew. All Earth’s oceans would run with red. The red that crucified him and made him unworthy would be their sentence. He would punish every abominable human for their freedom to bleed, and oh, would they bleed.

He clicked the safety on his blaster off, and walked down the landing board. Around the ship, he could see other squads emerging from similar doors. They went out to meet their destinies on this new planet that was both so fascinating and so abhorrent.

Karkat stepped off the board onto enemy land.

This was his hatchright.

This was his destiny.

And if the fates who commanded the stars said any differently, they could shove it up their asses. He was in control now. They said he was a mutant? They said he was a freak, barely able to be called a troll? They condemned him for existing? Fuck that.

He was going to make this planet pay, for the glory of the Alternian empire. He was going to snap it in half and rip out its core, all for the sake of his hatred. The humans with their silly fantasies of worth and desire. None of it would last.

Fuck his blood, and fuck the expectations it brought. Karkat was more a troll than anyone. He would show them. He would destroy this planet, and against the red it would bleed, no one would notice the hue running through his veins. He would prove himself worthy.

If there was no place he could go to be accepted, he would make his own.

The stars held no mercy. Not for him.

And so, he would hold none for them.
Men From Mars

Chapter Summary

"Up all night long
And there's something very wrong
And I know it must be late
Been gone since yesterday
I'm not like you guys
I'm not like you"

-Aliens Exist, blink-182

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dave never wasted a Saturday. Saturdays were the perfect opportunity to relax and sleep in. Bro wasn’t usually around on the weekends, and Dave could do whatever he wanted, which wasn’t much of anything. Still, it was better than strifing.

Nothing bad ever happened on Saturdays.

Dave reached over the edge of his bed and grabbed his alarm clock. It was only nine? Shit, it felt like he’d slept the whole day away… But he never set his alarm to go off before noon on weekends, so what had woken him?

He sat up and stretched, making a noise akin to the cry of a baby dinosaur as he did so. He had slept well the previous night. Well enough that his muscles weren’t sore and complaining like usual, and he felt awake as soon as he shoved his sunglasses onto the bridge of his nose.

Somewhere outside, a car alarm was blaring. That must have been what had woken him.

Dave sat in bed on his phone for a few minutes before moving to get up. He checked Tumblr, making sure that his comics had gotten their usual daily amount of notes. He left a sarcastic comment on someone’s Instagram post, then scrolled through the Snapchat stories of those he followed, not bothering to watch any of them. He was tempted to open BuzzFeed, but knew that if he did, he’d be lost in the maze of quizzes and not find his way out until the evening.

So he shoved away his blankets and rolled out of bed.

He grabbed a clean shirt and pair of pants and pulled them on, tossing the clothes he had slept in somewhere on his bedroom floor. He didn’t look to see where they landed. He didn’t care. His room was a fucking mess, and that was exactly how he liked it.

A quick trip to the kitchen told him that there was jack shit for breakfast. Somebody had eaten all the waffles again, and an empty carton of orange juice sat innocently by the sink. It was already hard enough to keep food in this house, with the fridge stuffed full of swords, did Bro have to make it worse by eating everything Dave bought?

Or maybe it was Cal. Honestly, it could have been either of them.
Dave pursed his lips. If he wanted food, he was going to have to go and buy it himself, and his growling stomach made it a necessity. He headed back into his room to grab a bag and some money.

He had a wad of cash stuffed beneath his mattress, and it was the one thing Bro had the decency not to screw with. Dave shoved his hand underneath his bed, feeling around for the crumpled bills. When he pulled it out, he had two fives and a one.

Shit. Was that really all he had?

He reached deeper. Yeah, there wasn’t anything else down there.

Dave had a job at the local record store, and it earned him enough for food, but it didn’t pay much. He usually had a good amount of money stashed away, but he must have spent more this month than he usually did. Fuck.

Well, this much would do for today, at least. He could worry about tomorrow when it came.

Dave pocketed the cash and left his bedroom. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and was about to head out the door when his eyes fell on a sword, resting on the kitchen counter.

It hadn’t been there before.

Dave swore under his breath. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with Bro’s mind games. He just wanted food, god damnit, and that was all he was going to get. He opened the door. While his back was turned, there came a rustling sound behind him, and he jumped a foot as he whipped back around.

Cal sat on the counter, the sword laid across his lap. Pinned to his chest was a note. Dave squinted. He didn’t want to get any closer, but he could just about read it from where he was…

“It’s dangerous to go alone. Take this.”

He would laugh if he wasn’t so on edge. Slowly, carefully, he approached the counter and snatched the sword. He backed up quickly to the door and opened it, shutting it behind him and locking it as he stepped out.

Bro had let him get away without a fight that time. Every once in a while he would do something like that, giving Dave a gift while taking nothing in return. Almost the way a sane guardian would. But not quite.

It was just to lull Dave into a false sense of security.

Dave slipped the sword into his backpack, the handle sticking out. Whatever. He was safe for now, and that was all that mattered.

The grocery store was only a few blocks away, but Dave wished it were further. It would give him an excuse to be away from the apartment for as long as possible. Even with the task of buying groceries, the trip wasn’t nearly long enough, and he found himself lingering in the juice aisle, grasping at straws for a reason to stay.

His reason presented itself in the form of a shout, the sound of shattering glass, and an explosion.

The force of the blast knocked over a shelving unit, and Dave threw himself to the side to avoid being crushed. He mentally thanked Bro for his heightened reflexes, while at the same time cursing him for eating the food and causing Dave to be in a grocery store that was being fucking bombed.
He stumbled down the aisle, the floor quaking under the force of several more detonations. These ones, luckily, were not in his direct vicinity. It felt as if something must be exploding a few blocks away, the devastation raking methodically over the street.

The few cashiers who were on shift were slumped at their posts. One of them had fallen into his register, and his nose was leaking blood as he slowly slipped to the ground.

Well…

Dave did have sunglasses on. It wasn’t like the police would be able to identify him.

He sprinted back down the aisle and gathered as much food as he could into his backpack. Lots of ramen, lots of cans. A can opener because he wasn’t stupid. Everything nonperishable. Apple juice, of fucking course, but water bottles, too. He had to make this stash last. He had to make it out of stuff Bro wouldn’t steal. He packed until his backpack could hold no more, and then he hightailed it the fuck out of that store before any of the cashiers could wake up.

As soon as he made it outside, he skidded to a stop.

The street was in ruins. Entire buildings had collapsed, and cars had been thrown to the side like toys. Dave had underestimated the force of the explosions. These were not street-destroyers. These were city-destroyers.

His first thought was terrorists. His second thought was World War Three.

His third thought came when he looked up and saw the ship.

It was bigger than anything he’d ever seen. Bright red and foreign in design, with a bow shaped something like a fork and wide arms extending from its sides. Beams of bright light shot down from the arms, and wherever they hit, something exploded or burst into flame.

There was no way that ship was human in origin.

And there Dave was, standing and staring like an idiot as an alien spaceship blew up the street around him. He scrambled underneath the awning of the next store over. Wait, no! He had to go back into the grocery store, he could hide there--

The store exploded in a rush of brick and metal. Dave dropped to the ground to avoid being decapitated by a flying piece of shrapnel.

Okay, this was getting ridiculous. Dave had been in plenty of dangerous situations over the course of his life, life-threatening ones, even. But nothing he’d been through had ever been like this. This felt like he would kick the bucket if he stepped a centimeter too far from where he was meant to be.

He had to find shelter, and fast.

He scanned up and down the street, automatically going into find-safety mode. It was a state he was very familiar with. If a strife with Bro ever got too intense, and he was bleeding more than was acceptable, he’d enter a place in his own head where he was calm. He would look at the situation rationally, and somehow, he would find a way to make it out alive.

There.

Down the street was the hardware store. He knew from his occasional trips there that they had a large and sturdy basement. (There had been multiple instances in which he had caused damage to his
own home while fighting or practicing with his sword, oops). He was reasonably sure the place could hold under fire, and plus, there were lots of heavy tools there that could be used as weapons.

There were small periods of time in between blasts from the spaceship, Dave assumed to recharge whatever weapon was being used. He could use the gaps to move if he was quick enough. Three… Two… One… Now! He darted out into the street, getting halfway across before the fire started back up and he had to duck behind a car. He waited until it halted again and made it the rest of the way across the street. He continued down the block in this fashion until he was close enough to the hardware store to duck inside.

Dave gave himself a moment to lean against the door and catch his breath. Holy shit. The apocalypse was happening, and it wasn’t because of global warming, it was fucking aliens.

Unless the aliens caused global warming. That could be a thing too.

Okay, moment over. Dave moved away from the door. Now, where had the stairwell been the last time he was here?

Right. He jogged across the store, his footsteps quietly slapping against the stone floor. The stairs were just ahead, winding down into the lower level. Dave ran down them as quickly as he could without falling. After a few steps, he opted to slide down the rail instead. He imagined a legal disclaimer: “Warning, the actor shown is a professionally trained coolkid. Don’t try this at home unless you want to get fucking wrecked.”

The building shook as he slid, and he was jostled from his perch on the rail. He struggled to right himself again as he tripped down the stairs, but then the shaking came again and jesus fuck he was about to fall on his face.

He fell on his face.

“I warned you about stairs, bro,” Sweet Bro whispered to him as he fell unconscious. “I told you, dog!”

***

Dave woke up what felt like an eternity later, but what was probably closer to ten minutes. There was a pounding headache brewing behind his eyes, and as he sat up, he realized with a frown that his glasses had snapped. He’d have to fix that as soon as possible. A coolkid should never be without his fresh shades, especially not in the apocalypse. The world had to retain some sense of order.

But first, he would have to explore the basement. He pushed himself upright. There was something hot and sticky at his temple, but he didn’t reach up and touch it. He already knew it was blood. When was it anything other than blood? “Yeah, man, I’m the main character in a horror movie and it turns out that weird sticky stuff was just honey! Crisis averted, bet you never saw that plot twist coming.”

Sometimes Dave had a hard time keeping his thoughts on track.

He ignored the blood seeping into his hair and stood up. He had to grab onto the railing, the motion had made him dizzy. Shit. This was so not a good condition to be in during an alien invasion.

He waited until the dizziness subsided to move on.

The basement was large, larger than the first level of the store. Dave could see the power tools over to his left. Intriguing, yet not something he wanted to pursue. Fighting with a circular saw could get a
But the hammers, those were a little more promising. Not really his style, but he could make it work. He was a Strider. He could adapt to anything.

Except cracked sunglasses. Dave slid them off his face and gave them a once-over. The right lens had cracked in two places, but if he squeezed the cracks together they became invisible. It would be an easy fix with some super glue. But the other had completely shattered, and it would need replacing. Maybe he should just get a new pair. Would hardware stores have sunglasses in stock?

Only one way to find out. The lightweight items were all on the first level of the store, so even if they didn’t have shades, there would be glue he could fix them with.

Dave turned back to the stairs, climbing up with more caution than he had descended. The tremors appeared to have stopped. That could have been a good thing or a bad thing, but he decided to consider it good. At least he wouldn’t be the butt of any more shitty overused internet jokes.

When he reached the first floor, he found it mostly undamaged. A couple of displays had been knocked over, and there were a few stray rolls of chicken wire lying about, but it was nothing unmanageable. He walked through the aisles that were more intact, looking up and down the shelving units for the glue. It had to be somewhere…

Something clattered to the floor, and Dave froze.

It was just something falling. Just some item knocked loose by the explosions finally hitting the ground. It was fine, it was just gravity, it was okay.

Dave might have been able to convince himself everything was all right if it weren’t for the muttered curse that followed the noise. Or, it sounded like a curse.

A scratchy voice said something quietly, then yelled something else. But the words it spoke were of no language Dave recognized. Another, smoother voice responded, and he realized with mounting horror that not only was there someone else in the store with him, there were multiple someones.

And they were most definitely fucking not human. No human made sounds like that.

Moving at a pace of an inch per minute, Dave approached the end of the aisle. He peered around the edge of the shelf.

Fuck, he couldn’t see anyone. He’d have to guess where the aliens (the word sent a thrill of fear through his body) were only from the sound of their voices. If there were any who weren’t talking, he wouldn’t be able to detect them, and he would be as good as fucked.

The stairs down to the basement were behind him, but if he could cross the store, he could walk out the front door. One option meant temporary safety. He could hide from the aliens, and maybe they would move on. But then again, maybe they wouldn’t, and then he’d be stuck down there when they discovered him. At least he’d have tools to protect himself… But if these guys had weapons like Dave had seen blasting down from that ship, a hammer wouldn’t do fuck against them.

His other option was to head for the door. It ran the risk of being discovered, but it wouldn’t matter once he was outside.

Unless there were more of them out there. Which there probably were.

Dave silently began to back towards the stairs. He didn’t think he’d ever felt this afraid. This went
beyond sword fights, beyond constant wariness and wounds. This was life and death. His heart pounded like it was trying to escape from his chest as a new voice shouted something.

The words it spoke sounded strange. Were they words? Maybe they weren’t, and the aliens were just spouting instinctive nonsense at each other… Oh, who was he kidding. Any species intelligent enough to invade a planet with a giant ship that shot lasers was bound to have a language.

It sounded strange, whatever kind of language or speech it was. The syllables were rough, and sharp in all the wrong places. Some were weirdly cut off from each other, like an instrument playing staccato notes, but others blended into each other and ran so fast Dave wondered how their tongues could keep up. If they had tongues. He wouldn’t quite know what to think if they didn’t have tongues. Hell, maybe they were giant jelly beasts that oozed along and left trails of slime wherever they--

Dave really needed to focus. Now was exactly the wrong time to get hysterical.

A quick glance down his aisle told him that it was safe. But between him and the stairwell was a gap where another aisle running perpendicular to his cut through. He would have to go through it to get back downstairs.

He kept close to the shelf, pressing himself against it as he made his way ever closer to the gap. Doing this wouldn’t hide him if an alien walked by, but it made him feel a little less conspicuous. He was so close now…

The gap was just inches away. All he had to do was run straight across and into the stairwell.

Dave peeked out to the left. No aliens. He peeked to the right.

Holy shit holy shit holy fucking hell what the fuck was that thing.

He stepped back, his heart hammering. So that was what an alien looked like.

It was surprisingly humanoid. It had the same body structure, though its back had been turned, so Dave couldn’t be sure of how human the face was. The most noticeable differences were the grey skin and orange horns, which he could see even from a distance.

The gun tucked into a loop at its belt was also pretty fucking intimidating.

But its back was turned, so, hypothetically, if Dave was stealthy about it, he could sneak by unnoticed. He took a deep breath to ready his courage.

And then he threw caution to the wind, because at this point he was too stressed to be rational. He ran straight across the opening and practically dived into the stairwell. He raced down the steps, somehow keeping himself upright, and continued on as far as he could go into the basement.

He stopped in the middle of the room. The aliens would think to check the back wall first, if they were looking for him. He would have to give them more of a challenge.

He searched the store as quickly and quietly as he could for a hiding place. They could be down at any moment. All he needed was somewhere to hide, preferably towards the middle of the floor. That way there would be shelves all around to conceal him.

Oh. Tents. Perfect. Unbelievably predictable, but perfect. Dave unzipped one and hurled himself inside, zipping up the flap behind him so hard he almost broke the zipper. He didn’t even bother wondering about why there were camping supplies in a hardware store. The place could sell
whatever the fuck it wanted, as long as he could stay in this tent and keep breathing for a few more minutes.

The headache he had been pointedly ignoring came crashing back over him as he sat back and rubbed his eyes. It had all happened so fast. All he was trying to do was get some goddamn breakfast, and the world had to spring the apocalypse on him. Just his luck.

He pulled out his cell phone.

The feeds on all his social media accounts were hopelessly clogged with liveblogs and photos of the spaceship. Apparently it was moving from East to West across the United States. Dave was about to make a sarcastic tweet about aliens and their ill-timed invasions when a thought occurred to him.

Why not make it genuine? Sure, his would just be another plea for help in the screaming void that was the internet, but because of his comics, he actually had a pretty large following. Maybe large enough that some of his fans lived nearby and could help get him out of his current situation. He imagined it playing out. A loyal posse of twelve-year-olds would bust in with nerf guns and charge the invaders, screaming quotes from Hella Jeff as they made their advance.

The aliens would be defeated, and it would be the most iconic moment of triumph in human history. Dave would make a comic in its honor.

But, all fantasies aside, Dave needed help. He quickly composed a tweet and sent it out. Thank God the internet was still in operation.

stuck in masons hardware store in austin tx with aliens. pls help

Now, all there was left to do was wait.

In all likelihood, the tweet would do jack shit. He would be stuck in this basement, feasting on canned soup until he was finally discovered and blown to bits by laser beams. His last words would be some deliciously ironic commentary on society, and no one would ever hear it, except for aliens who could never appreciate it because it had nothing to do with their culture.

Lousy goddamn stupid aliens.

Dave sat in his tent. He scrolled through his phone and the cries for help of a million doomed teenagers. He pulled the sword out of his backpack, suddenly grateful for every scar and memory his brother had given him. He waited.

He waited for his headache to fade. He waited to be found. He waited for the encounter that would decide his fate.

He waited with sword in hand, staring death in the face and giving it no ground. His gaze was cool and strong, betraying none of the fear in his heart. He was a Strider. He could survive. Even when all others failed, he would succeed, and every species not native to his planet could ironically fall down a flight of stairs.

Dave Strider was going to survive.

Chapter End Notes
As you can see, chapters are semi-linear. Since they alternate between characters, every time a chapter for Dave begins it will begin by telling what happened to him during Karkat's chapter, and vice versa.
Aim To Kill

Chapter Summary

"Justice and mercy, this is where they kiss"
- Justice and Mercy, Flyleaf

Observing Earth’s culture via the internet had been one thing. Walking through its midst was something else entirely.

Karkat had watched as the ship rose up, then flew off to an area of tall buildings. Could they be hivestems? Who knew. It was definitely a city, but it looked different in that way most Earth constructs did. The ship began decimating the area. Several squadrons began to follow it, so Eridan beckoned his along and they did the same.

The humans were fast, if nothing else. They wasted no time in getting the fuck out once they noticed the ship blowing things up. They rushed past with their odd metal transportation devices and loud screams, many of them straight into a waiting squadron’s fire.

“We’ll go into the city after they’re finished blastin’ it,” Eridan had ordered. “To pick off any stragglers. There are to be no survivors.”

Eventually the ship had ceased fire, moving across the sky to whatever area it wished to destroy next. Karkat couldn’t bring himself to keep looking up at it. God, this planet’s sun was so bright.

“Here,” Kanaya said kindly. The visor of her helmet was pushed down, and she moved Karkat’s into the same position. Instantly, the material took on a darker filter. Like sunglasses, but stronger. Karkat breathed in relief. “Better?” He nodded.

The squads were quickly beginning to disperse now that the ship had disappeared. They ran in every direction. Towards the city, away from it, some straight out into the desert. Karkat snorted. Those chumps could’ve stood to watch some Earth movies and get schooled. No human was going to be living out in the sand wastes, not unless they were unusually antisocial.

He followed Eridan towards the city, making small observations as he went. His movies had helped him get a scale of the size of Earth cities, so this one was pretty big. There would definitely be some stray aliens to take care of. The thought sent a shiver through his body, which he attributed to excitement.

The entrance to the city was inconveniently blocked by heaps of rubble. But, undeterred, Eridan’s squad scaled the pile and descended the other side, staring into the wreckage of what had been a thriving center of life.

There were several bodies already littered across the street. Their lifeless pink and brown faces were frozen in expressions of terror. Some appeared to have been crushed or maimed by debris, while others had the telltale gigantic hole in their chests that said they’d been hit by the ship’s blaster. Karkat clenched his fists. They were bleeding everywhere, those disgraceful little shits. Their red blood made rivers, flowing down the streets and pooling into detestable lakes of scarlet.
They were all clearly dead, it was no use wasting blaster shots by firing at them to make sure, so the squadron moved on.

They encountered no living humans as they made their way through the streets. Plenty of dead ones, but no living. There had to be living ones. They were just making things difficult and hiding.

“Okay, good news, everyone,” Eridan sighed. “We’re gonna have to search this whole place.”

“Isn’t that already what we’re doing?” Terezi asked.

“No, the whole place. As in, inside the buildings.”

There was a collective groan.

“It’s the Condescension’s orders that there are to be no survivors!” Eridan snapped. “Do you want to disappoint her?”

Everyone sobered up, except Karkat, who still frowned. “Come on, dude. You know she’s just going to nuke the planet after we’re done. No human is going to survive that.”

“I don’t know that, actually,” said Eridan. “Nobody knows what she’ll do with it. This planet’s unusually fertile, in case you didn’t notice. Maybe she’ll use it for resources.”

“Is one tiny human going to stop her?” Karkat said skeptically.

It was Eridan’s turn to frown. “What’s your problem, Kar?”

“What’s our problem,” Vriska corrected. “I don’t want to search every building either. It’s just your common case of laziness. Eridan, if we stay and search this place, we’ll end up the only squadron still here. No matter your argument, it’s never good to be isolated like that.”

“Then we’d better work quickly,” he sniffed.

“Eridan!”

Eridan made a noise of frustration, his fingers raking a familiar path through his hair. “Fuckin’, okay, fine. We won’t do every single one. We’ll do most, though, and if I catch you slacking it’s thirty reps of pushups.”

Vriska snorted. “Yeah, sure, Mr. Supreme Leader. Right on it.” She gave a mocking salute and headed into a nearby building. Eridan stared after her with contempt in his eyes, but eventually followed.

Karkat resisted the urge to giggle.

The urge was quickly wiped away as they combed over the building. After ten minutes it became painfully obvious to them all that it was empty, but Eridan stubbornly refused to let them leave before they were finished. They all earned multiple sets of reps for their complaining. Karkat’s arms were aching by the time their leader pronounced the job done. “Time for the next one!”

Vriska groaned, and earned herself another set of reps.

It was a slow and arduous process, and it took them hours to make it all the way down the street. If he was honest, Karkat was fed up with it. So he proposed a plan.

“It’s time to cut the bullshit. This is way too slow. How about we split into two groups of three and
go that way? Eridan, you can stay with Vriska and Terezi, and I’ll take Sollux and Kanaya.”

Vriska looked alarmed. “You’ll lead the other group? Hell no! Don’t leave me with this loser!” She jabbed a finger in Eridan’s direction.

“I don’t trust you out of my sight,” Eridan said wearily. “Go ahead, Kar. This gives us an opportunity to test the communicators in our helmets. Flip the switch on the inside to turn them on, and the reverse for off. Be back by sundown.”

Karkat nodded and jogged off ahead, Sollux and Kanaya following close behind. As soon as they were out of earshot, Sollux spoke up.

“Firht thingth firht. We go into motht of the buildingth and get enough information about them to thurvive when fishnook inevitably quizzeth uth. We thearch a little bit becauthe we’re not total lazy athholeth... But in no fucking univerthe are we thearching every conthtruct from nugbone to strut pod.”

Kanaya nodded vehemently. “I could not agree more.”

“Good, because I’m not going to fucking make you,” Karkat said. “We’ll only do an amount of searching that’s appropriate. But still, we’d better get going or we won’t make much progress. This city’s huge even without looking through every building.”

He stepped over a fallen hunk of concrete and went into a store.

The interior was bigger than he had expected. The ceilings were high, and as Karkat padded in, his footsteps on the stone floor echoed slightly. The aisles of the store were stocked with what appeared to be building materials.

He hadn’t seen anything like this since he was a pupa. The carpenter drones had carried tools like those ones, he remembered. But these versions were much smaller. Appropriate for the small size of humans.

Wait, did they build their own hives? Karkat had never seen a carpenter drone in their films, but that wasn’t too uncommon, so he hadn’t thought anything of it. Weird.

He heard Sollux and Kanaya come in behind him, the door closing with a soft click. He turned to face them. “Here’s the deal. Kanaya, you take the front part of the store. Sollux, you search the middle, the second part. I’ll go to the back.” He stood for a moment, then, without another word, he headed for the back of the store.

He glanced back and forth as he walked, sweeping over the area. No humans here, no humans there. None under that display. None to be seen.

Somewhere in the distance, an object clattered to the floor. Karkat heard Sollux curse.

“Fuck. Hey, guys?” he yelled. “Do we need to be ththealthy about thith? I forgot to athk.”

“If we were attempting to be, you have just negated our efforts,” Kanaya called back. “But no matter. I doubt there is anyone here. And if by some chance there is, they cannot avoid us forever.”

Karkat rolled his eyes and kept moving.

After a few minutes of quiet walking, he passed by a poster on the wall. He stopped to look it over.
A chunk of text written in the human language he had come to recognize as English filled most of it. There was also an image of an adult male, smiling and giving a thumbs up. He was wearing a hard yellow hat and an orange vest. Fucking humans and their weird trends.

Wait what was that.

Something had moved behind Karkat. He froze.

After a minute, he relaxed. It was nothing. Why would he be worried, anyway? Humans were weak and fragile creatures and could do him no what the FUCK was that.

He whipped around just in time to see a blurred figure race across the aisle and disappear into an opening in the wall. He paused for a moment as the sight sunk in.

“Well, goddamn,” he mumbled. He laughed quietly, then louder. Yes! Run, human, run! Karkat needn’t have been so startled, the poor little shit was petrified in comparison!

He slipped his blaster out of its loop at his belt. That human had every reason to be scared. Say hello to Karkat Vantas, bitch.

He approached the opening the alien had disappeared into. A stairwell. Karkat hadn’t even noticed it there before. But then again, he hadn’t noticed the human, either. He needed to step up his game.

Down the stairs, he found, was another level of the store. He should probably call Sollux or Kanaya to help him, but he felt a childish sort of possessiveness regarding this human. He was going to kill it himself, and then he was going to brag about it, because he was fucking amazing at conquest. And everyone would recognize him for it.

First, he crossed the room. The alien had skedaddled so fast Karkat wouldn’t have been surprised if it slammed into the opposite wall in its haste. But the back wall was bare, except for yet more building material.

There was no human to be found.

He checked the surrounding walls. No humans there, either. So the thing had decided to be clever and head into the aisles, then. Karkat humphed. It could run, but it couldn’t hide.

He paced methodically up and down the rows, searching and listening carefully for any trace of suspicious activity. The human should have been shaking in its boots. If it wasn’t, Karkat would manually shake it by its throat before he shot it. The thought brought a smile to his face.

He passed by a display of some kind of small, fabric-based hives. He snorted. You thought aliens couldn’t get any weirder, and then, surprise surprise, they did. Who would ever stay in such a flimsy-looking shelter?

He could hear something breathing within one of them.

Karkat slowly moved closer, listening hard. Yeah. There was definitely something alive in there.

He smirked, clicking off the safety on his blaster. He walked up and tore his claws through the cloth, shredding it to pieces and exposing the human sitting inside.

Huh.

Karkat had been expecting an expression of comical terror, but this thing just stared at him. It looked
completely unimpressed. Plus, it had sunglasses on. Even though it was inside.

Apparently douchebags were a universal constant.

Karkat shook off his surprise and raised his blaster. It was then that he noticed the sword in the human’s hand. It stood up in an instant and shot out of the fabric-hive, bringing itself mere inches away from the tip of Karkat’s weapon. Now was his chance to shoot!

It quickly aligned the sword with Karkat’s blaster, poking it into his chest, but not so far as to injure. *Fuck.* Karkat had been too slow. He growled, tightening his grip on the blaster. Would the thing dare try and stab him?

Up this close, he could get a good look at the abomination that called itself an intelligent being.

It was weird as fuck looking, that was for sure. Its skin was a peachy shade, not really white, but close, instead of grey. Its hair was light, closer to a dusty yellow than anything else. It had no horns. Karkat had almost gotten used to the sight of humans, but they would never stop being disgusting.

The human smiled.

What the fuck? Karkat was pressing a gun against it! Was it suicidal, or were humans just way dumber than he’d ever realized?

It said something in its soft, muted-sounding language. To Karkat’s horror, he recognized the sound. It was a greeting, commonly used by the stereotypical “coolkids” found in many examples of cinema. Karkat tried to remember the subtitles for it… What had it meant? Oh, yeah.

“*Sup.*”

He actually had to fight back a laugh. Here he was, pointing a blaster at an alien douche in shades, and it had just asked him “what’s up.”

The human seemed to see his expression as a good sign, and it launched into some rambling tangent that Karkat couldn’t decipher with a dictionary and two sweeps of free time. He growled again. It had made a mistake with its casual demeanor. Karkat was still going to kill it.

The growl made it shut its mouth, thankfully.

Now they were at a stalemate. Karkat was reasonably sure he could shoot the thing before getting stabbed, but he wasn’t too keen on risking it. Getting blood all over his armor would be a bad idea. Unless he could pass it off for human blood…

His face twisted in disgust as he was reminded of their filthy hue. They were the same as Karkat, but they were never punished for it. They just got to live out their short, unimportant lives, getting stabbed all they wanted. Never with the threat of culling or the shame of knowing they should never have been “born.”

What was it like?

What was it like to be so *free*?

The human was talking again. The words all gibberish to Karkat, but it didn’t seem to mind. It backed up a little, and Karkat’s fingers twitched over the trigger.

It pointed to itself and said something. After a few seconds, he pointed more forcefully and repeated
the sound.

Was it… trying to tell Karkat its name?

“Daaayyv.”

Dave.

Its name was Dave. What a thrilling and absolutely pointless piece of information.

After a while it seemed to give up on communication and began ranting again.

Karkat scowled. If it wanted to talk nonsense at him, he’d do it right back. “You think you’re real fucking clever for telling me your name? You’re not. You’re a brainless little oinkbeast and I can’t believe I’ve let you live this long. Looking at your face makes me want to hurl. God, will you shut the fuck up? I’m going to shoot you now, and all the vapid human friends you probably don’t have are going to leak gallons of dismay fluid onto your corpse because they wished this could have happened sooner. Stop fucking talking, I’m trying to insult you.”

The human seemed delighted at Karkat’s speech, and it yammered on even as he tried to give it a verbal smackdown. Whatever. It wasn’t going to understand anyway. But he felt he ought to give it some warning before he killed it.

“Dave human!” he snapped. “Shut up!”

The human stopped mid-sentence. It smiled, and Karkat shuddered. This was fucking revolting.

It dropped its sword.

Okay, it was definitely suicidal. Wait, fuck, did that mean he shouldn’t kill it? He wanted to do whatever would cause it the most pain.

“Say goodbye, Dave human,” Karkat snarled. He shoved his blaster against the alien’s weak, detestable form and prepared to pull the trigger. The human slipped off its sunglasses.

Karkat’s fingers trembled.

Fuck.

Its eyes were red. Bright red. Just like Karkat’s would be someday, and as it looked at him, it looked so lost. Of course it didn’t want to die, but there was something more… The expression was familiar, but in a way Karkat couldn’t understand.

He had a sudden vision of a troll with red eyes and nubby horns, staring up at a sky that was not Alternia’s. He was making a decision. He looked at Karkat, and as he did, Karkat knew that everything was going to change.

*I will always be with you.*

Karkat tore his eyes away from the human. He flipped the blaster’s safety back on and shoved it back into his belt. He grabbed the human by its ugly shirt collar and pulled it close.

“You listen to me, you fucking repulsive shitstain,” he spat. “I’m not going to give you what you want and end your life. I’m going to make you suffer a thousand agonies, and you’re going to have to bear the weight of every decision you ever make, and you’ll probably end up starving to death or expiring in some other wonderfully painful way. And I’m going to know when it happens. And I’m
going to laugh, because you make me sick. You don’t deserve the life I’m giving you.”

He shoved the creature away, but before he did, he ran his finger along its cheek. With a switch of his claws, a fresh set of cuts opened, and it began to bleed. Cherry red dripped down its face.

“Keep bleeding, motherfucker. See where it gets you.”

Karkat turned and walked away. The human did not say anything, and neither did he. He just walked. And they parted in silence.

Oh, how Karkat loathed humanity.

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“Well, that wath a wathte of time,” Sollux grumbled.

Working through another two streets of stores had taken them the rest of the day. Karkat hadn’t told his friends about the human; he didn’t want to talk about it, and it would wasted even more of their time. Now, streaks of dusk were beginning to creep into the sunny skies, and he could feel a cool night breeze beginning to waft into the air.

“And here cometh our leader, hallowed be hith name.” Sollux’s face soured.

Eridan, Vriska, and Terezi were coming down the street, Terezi covered in a strange white powder.

“Guys!” she shrieked. “Did you know they have entire stores dedicated to baking grubcakes? But there aren’t even any grubs in them! No meat at all!”

Eridan looked like he had aged four sweeps. “Next time,” he warned Karkat, his eyes wide. “You are taking these two on your team.”

“Oh, please. We aren’t thaaaaaat bad.” Vriska rolled her eyes. “And who says there’ll be a next time? Did all of this not convince you that city-searching yields no results whatsoever?”

“You know what?” said Eridan. He threw his hands into the air. “I give up. Fine. We’ll move on and catch up with the other squadrons, we aren’t doing much good here.”

Terezi whooped. “Does this mean we’ll actually get to go invade? Somewhere where there are still aliens around to kill?”

“Yes. It’s almost nightfall, so we can travel now.”

Terezi paused. “Oh, fuck. We have to walk, don’t we.”

“Nope!” Sollux announced. “Nope, nope, nope. I am not walking any further today.” He left the group and strode over towards one of the metal contraptions that littered the streets. It was relatively undamaged, with only a smashed window and large dent in the front. “The humanth evacuated in theythe. Let’th thee if we can get one running.”

Karkat looked at the group and shrugged before following his friend. Sollux shoved a dead human out of the front seat and climbed inside.

They all managed to pile into the vehicle. Sollux and Eridan took the front seats, Karkat and Kanaya the middle ones, and Terezi and Vriska occupied the back row. Sollux fussed over the controls, trying to figure out how to start it. He twisted a small chunk of metal. The engines revved to life, and Terezi cheered. Her cheer was cut off as they lurched forward, then stopped just as suddenly.
“Wait, Eridan, get out for a thecond.”

Sollux opened the door and hopped out, Eridan doing the same. Sollux walked around and re-entered the vehicle, taking the seat Eridan had been in moments before.

“You drive,” he ordered. “I’ll have to uthe my pthionicth to get the rubble out of the way.”

Eridan jumped into the driver’s seat. He had no objections to being in charge of the driving. He pressed a pedal on the floor and the machine moved forward.

“See?” he said smugly. “Nothin’ to it.”

He pressed the pedal down harder and instantly ran off the road.

“You’re a thitty driver,” Sollux complained. “Why do you have to make my job tho hard? Get out again. Thomeone elthe take over.”

“I ain’t doin’ it on purpose!”

“I almost wish you were,” Vriska mumbled. “It’d be a perfect example of black flirting, and I would be soooooooo fucking relieved that it wasn’t directed at me for once.

“Oh shit!” Terezi gave her a high five.

Karkat was never one to turn down a conversation regarding quadrants, but he felt like this could get annoying real fucking fast.

It was slow going with Sollux and Eridan at the wheel, but they were definitely moving faster than they would have been if they walked. Eventually they hit a patch of clear road and were able to drive out of the city uninhibited.

The bickering and banter in the vehicle ceased after a few hours. It may have been nighttime, the time when trolls normally awoke, but Karkat had been awake for far too long and was exhausted both physically and mentally.

He couldn’t stop thinking about that fucking human.

Karkat had let him go. Why the fuck had he let him go? He was supposed to be proving himself as a troll, not as an idiot. Dave should have been dead the second Karkat broke into that fabric-hive.

Wait. When had he started thinking of Dave as a ‘he’ instead of an ‘it’?

When had Karkat started calling him by his name?

Karkat stared out the window, his jaw set in an expression of controlled fury. Fucking humans screwing with his think pan. Why hadn’t he just pulled the trigger?

Was he just too weak? Was that it? He was sympathizing with the alien, and it made him to sentimental to take action? No. Fuck no. It wasn’t that, it would never be that. Karkat may have been a mutant, but he had some self-respect.

It was that goddamn expression. What had it reminded him of?

I will always be with you.

Karkat swallowed a growl.
“Are you all right?” Kanaya whispered. Their seats were close enough that she could lean against him, and their faces were close as Karkat turned his head to her.

“I’m fine,” he whispered back. His narrowed eyes told a different story, but Kanaya did not press. He knew she would be there to listen if he ever decided to talk. She closed her eyes and relaxed against his shoulder.

He would be feeling affectionate if he wasn’t so fucking pissed. Now the human was interfering with his moirallegiance? Just add it to the list of things that were so insufferable about him.

The shades. The stupid pale skin and hair, the appearance so foreign and wrong. The gravity of Karkat’s decision to let him free. It all made him want to claw his own face off. God, that Dave human was just so fucking despicable.

Tucked into his armor pocket was his palmhusk. It vibrated against his side, and, without disturbing Kanaya, he pulled it out.

-- caligulasAquarium [CA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

CA: hey kar

CA: you look pretty bothered back there wwhats up

“Quit texting and driving!” Sollux snapped. Eridan ignored him, shifting his grip on the wheel as he prepared to thumb out another message.

Karkat sighed.

CG: DUDE, THIS IS HEADING A LITTLE TOO FAR INTO FEELINGS JAM TERRITORY FOR ME TO BE COMFORTABLE.

CA: wwoah shit no i didnt mean it like that

CA: i respect you and kan you knoww that

CA: its okay if you dont wwanna talk about it

CG: THANKS.

CA: i just meant like

CA: bro to bro

CA: if you do evver wwanna talk im here

CA: ivve got plenty of experience in the black quadrant so i could give you tips if you need

CG: WHAT THE FUCK?

CG: WHERE DID THAT COME FROM. SERIOUSLY, WHAT THE FUCK??

CA: i knoww that expression youvve got on

CA: youre waxin pitch for somebody am i right

CA: cant stop thinkin about howw much you dislike em
CA: so wwhos the lucky guy or lady?

CG: FIRST OF ALL, THAT'S NONE OF YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS. SECOND OF ALL, I'M NOT WAXING PITCH FOR ANYONE. I THINK YOU'RE JUST REFLECTING YOUR DESPERATION FOR SOLLUX OR VRISKA TO HATE YOU BACK ONTO ME.

CA: see i knoww somefins up because usually you share all your personal stuff wwith me

CA: if you didnt havve somefin to hide you wwouldnt be so defensivve youd just givve an explanation for your hateface and movve on

CA: i knoww you too wwell

CA: remember our gossips kar wwe used to talk so much but wwe dont do that much anymore

CA: those gossips wwere the best

CG: THEY STILL ARE THE BEST, WE CAN STILL HAVE THEM. IT REALLY HAS BEEN WAY TOO LONG.

CG: ALSO, GET SCHOOLFED: YOU MAY HAVE KNOWN THE OLD ME, BUT I'M GETTING A LITTLE LESS EMBARRASSING. KEEPING SOME SHIT TO MYSELF. YOU KNOW. GETTING SOME “SELF-RESPECT.” SO YOU CAN KISS ANY NOTIONS OF ME HAVING A DARK CRUSH GOODBYE, ONLY PAST ME WOULD ACT THAT OBVIOUS.

CG: ALSO... CLASSY HOW YOU DIDN'T DENY ANYTHING I SAID ABOUT VRISKA OR SOLLUX.

CG: WINK WINK NUDGE NUDGE.

CA: i wwas gettin to that bitch

CA: im tellin you im ovver vvriska i havvent had feelins for her in swweeps

CG: YOU’VE BEEN HITTING ON HER ALL DAY.

CA: wwell

CA: okay i thought she might still be interested and can you blame me for tryin to reignite a flame

CA: shes better than nothin evven if i dont run that dark for her anymore

CG: YOU ARE A SAD, SAD SACK OF BILGEWATER-INFUSED SHIT.

CA: shut up

CG: WHAT ABOUT SOLLUX THEN.

CA: thats a different situation right there and i dont knoww if wwe havve time to get into it

CG: THAT’S A LOAD OF HOOFBEAST SHIT. YOU KNOW YOU WANT TO SPILL EVERY FUCKING SHRED OF FEELING YOU’VE GOT FOR HIM INTO MY AWAITING HEAR DUCTS.

CG: AND YOU ALSO KNOW THAT I WILL LISTEN AND GIVE YOU THE MOST SAGE ADVICE YOU’VE EVER MOTHERFUCKING HEARD.
CA: thats true but wwe really dont havve time
CA: hes about to kick me off my palmhusk i can tell can you see his face
CG: NO, THE NUGBONE REST IS IN THE WAY.
CA: he looks like hes gonna fuckin explode hahaha
CA: i wwish i could take a picture
CA: im gonna try and take a picture hold on
CG: YOU SAPPY HATEFUL FUCK.

-- caligulasAquarium [CA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

Sollux had clearly had enough.

“Thтоп being thuch an irrethponthible driver you bulgefuck!” he fumed. He snatched Eridan’s palmhusk and shoved it beneath his seat. His face was flushed yellow as he glared at Eridan, who was sniggering.

“Sure, Sol.”

“Don’t fucking call me that!”

“Such drama,” Kanaya murmured.

There was a tense silence. Sollux was still glaring daggers at Eridan, who still looked very tempted to laugh. He could not resist the temptation.

“Hey, Sol, whose fault would it be if you punched me right now and I crashed this thing? Because you look like you’re about to.”

Sollux grasped the edge of his seat tightly, his claws puncturing it. “Eridan,” he said through clenched teeth. “If you don’t thut up right now I’m going to throttle you and I don’t care if thith thing cratheth becauthe of it.”

“Woah, dude, comin’ on a little strong are we?”

“All right,” Karkat interrupted. “I am speaking in a purely platonic fashion so don’t you fucking dare rope me in for auspistice duties, but you both need to shut up. Kanaya’s trying to sleep, we’re all fucking exhausted, so could you please give it a rest.”

They both looked a little ashamed.

“Thorry, Kanaya.”

She hummed. Karkat papped her cheek softly.

“No big deal. Just keep a lid on it.”

Eridan nodded, his glance nuggets back on the road. After that, the vehicle proceeded quietly.

It was difficult to fall asleep without sopor slime. Karkat had completely forgotten that they would not have access to recuperacoons while invading, and they were a privilege he now sorely missed.
He fidgeted and adjusted his position numerous times, but couldn’t get comfortable. Eventually he gave up.

“Havin’ a little trouble, there?” Eridan commented. He kept his voice quiet. All the other trolls had fallen asleep.

“Yeah. What about you? You look like you could use a rest.” Indeed, deep purple shadows had formed beneath Eridan’s glance nuggets, and Karkat had noticed his nugbone nodding suspiciously.

“We all could. I’ll manage fine, though.” Eridan held back a yawn. It was a valiant fight, but he did not succeed, and he had to take a deep breath before continuing. “Someone else is drivin’ next time we have to relocate, though. And we might need a bigger vehicle.”

“Yeah, you and Sollux looked about ready to leap down each other’s throats.”

Eridan grimaced. “We’re havin’ this conversation now, then?”

“Only if you want to,” Karkat conceded.

“Yeah, I kinda do.” Eridan glanced down at Sollux’s sleeping form. “Do you think he… Nah, scratch that, he sure as hell hates me back. But do you think it would screw with the team too much if we actually acted on it?”

Karkat considered this. “I don’t know. Somebody could always step in as auspistice, I’m sure Kanaya would be up to it. And I guess it would be kind of hypocritical of me to be in a relationship and yet not let you have one.”

“Have you and her made it official, then?”

“Not yet. We don’t really need to. It’s just kind of there, you know?”

Eridan nodded. “Yeah…” He hesitated. “That’s how it was with Fef, for a while.”

Karkat shifted closer. He was sitting directly behind the driver’s seat, which made conversation awkward. He looked in the small mirror next to Eridan in order to make glance nugget contact. “You miss her a lot, don’t you? How come they didn’t make her an officer? You’d think her blood alone would be enough.”

Eridan snorted. “Are you out of your pan? Her blood’s the reason why they didn’t. She’s the heiress, they wouldn’t just throw her onto the front lines. Nah. She stayed on the ship.” He could not disguise the misery in his voice.

“Did you see her at all, on the voyage?”

“A few times. It was different, though, cause we broke it off right before the draft and all. I was goin’ to tell her I had… other feelin’s for her, as soon as I saw her, but she seemed so happy to be out of a quadrant with me that I just couldn’t do it. And I’m mostly over it, but… I miss havin’ her as a friend.” He fell silent. His thumb stroked the surface of the steering wheel. “I’m glad I’ve still got you, though.”

“Say any more shit like that and I’ll think you’re disrespecting Kanaya.”

“That was fuckin’ platonic and you know it. Can’t a guy get in touch with his emotional side? Cod.”

Karkat did not respond. He leaned his head against the window, staring out into the unfamiliar
landscape. Once they had left the city, it was all desert, sand dunes and craggy rocks. Some sparse vegetation dotted the wastes, but for the most part, it was a dead land.

He started. “Wait, what’s that?”

Eridan looked out the left window. “What?”

Karkat squinted. “There’s something out there. Moving. It looks like a machine…”

It was drawing closer as they drove. As it approached the foreground, Karkat could make it out better. It slightly resembled the land war devices the Condesce was rumored to sometimes use…

“Is that a fucking tank?”

Eridan breathed in sharply. “If it is, it’s not ours. The Condesce didn’t bring any.”

“And if we can see them,” Karkat murmured. “They’ve definitely seen us.”

Terezi stirred. “Guys? What’s going on? What’s that noise?”

“There’s a tank out there,” Karkat said under his breath. “And what do you mean, what’s that noise?”

She frowned. “Oh, you sighted folks. I always forget you can’t hear as well as me. It sounds like artillery fire… Where are we?” She sat up groggily.

“I think we’re close to the next city,” said Eridan. “I can see somethin’ up ahead.”

Terezi pressed her cartilaginous nub to the window, inhaling deeply. “That doesn’t smell like a city.”

She froze. She turned to face Karkat, and her face was slack.

“That doesn’t smell like a city. That smells like a war zone.”

And as they grew closer, they could see that she was right. Plumes of smoke rose from smashed buildings. But it was not the level of destruction that had visited the previous city. Many buildings still stood tall. The ground was crawling with humans and trolls alike, and tanks rolled in from every direction.

“Are they firing at the Imperial battleship?” Vriska said incredulously. She pushed herself up, suddenly awake.

“I think they are,” Eridan said in awe.

Karkat had to admit, humans were gutsy as hell. But perhaps they just didn’t know what they were up against. The familiar twinges of anger that he was beginning to associate with humans surfaced in his pump biscuit. They were a burning fire, a hot desire to incinerate the planet whose air he now breathed. Stupid humans. Stupid Earth. Stupid Dave.

They could fight all they wanted.

But in the end, they would all burn.
It was a few hours before Dave felt safe enough to relocate.

He had just been face-to-face with a hostile alien and it was the weirdest experience of his life. He had rambled to it about Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff, it had scratched up his face, and he was pretty sure it had called him a motherfucker.

But it had let him go.

He was pretty sure it had been about to kill him before he took off his shades. What had made it change its mind? Pity? Or, maybe the act of removing sunglasses was some incredibly moving gesture on other planets? Dave didn’t know. But the most surprising thing was not his continued survival.

The most surprising thing had been how human it was.

When Dave had seen its face, it had been a shock. The grey skin, yellow eyes, fangs, and horns were definitely intimidating. But otherwise the face was just like his, and the mannerisms as well. Dave could see the hesitation in its eyes when it raised its weapon. He could see the annoyance on its face when he began rambling in a language it did not understand.

He could see it doubting itself when he finally removed his shades and looked at it eye-to-eye.

He supposed he should stop calling the alien “it.” It had looked like a male, though there was no way to tell. Dave would assume it was a guy. That took care of pronouns. But did it -- he -- have a name?

When Dave had tried to communicate his name, the alien had seemed to understand. He had used it when snapping something in his alien language, probably telling Dave to shut up. But he had never returned the favor.

Dave thought it would be a little rude to mentally refer to him as “pissy grey guy,” but hey, he was the one who hadn’t introduced himself. Any resulting nicknames were his own fault.

Dave touched a finger to the still-bleeding row of cuts on his cheek. A warning. He and Mr. Pissy may not have spoken the same language, but Dave understood perfectly what these marks meant. Next time, he wouldn’t be so lucky.

But he had waited long enough in this basement. He hoped the aliens had cleared out by now, because he needed to stretch his legs.

And also maybe look for other survivors.
He wondered how much of the world had been invaded. The whole United States? The whole continent? No, it couldn’t be. The spaceship he’d seen hadn’t been moving that fast, and he was pretty sure there was only one. Pretty sure.

He wondered how many other people were still alive in his city. There was no way everyone else had gotten as lucky as he had.

Dave contemplated putting his sword away, but decided against it. He didn’t know how soon he’d have another encounter, nor how violent it might be. It was best to carry protection.

He was infinitely grateful that he had already stocked food in his bag. Otherwise, he’d have to go back to the remains of the grocery store, and he wasn’t too eager to pick through the wreckage until he found something. He could just raid a corner store if he needed more supplies.

How quickly the apocalypse turned one into a delinquent.

After the alien had left him alone, Dave had retreated back into his shredded tent to think. Now that he was done thinking and quite ready to leave, he secured his backpack over his shoulders and climbed out again. Time to move.

When he climbed up the stairs and began to cross the store’s first level, it seemed empty. But that had been the case when it was filled with aliens, too, so Dave moved as cautiously as he could. He reached the entrance without ambush. Glancing over his shoulder one last time, he headed out the door into the cool night air.

The city was a bit different at night. It was a bit different in ruins. In darkened ruins, it was like a new place entirely. Dave had to climb over gigantic chunks of fallen buildings in order to cross the street.

He started the walk back to his apartment, unsure of what he would find, unsure of what he wanted to find. His phone somehow ended up in his hand as he walked.

His digital cry for help had actually gotten some response, to his surprise. Most of the replies were regretful notes, people wishing they could help, but saying they could not, due to distance. Some were the usual haters. If anything could survive alien invasion, it was internet trolls. But there was one that was different.

"it isn’t safe to talk here,“ it read. "we’ll send you a message over tumblr so it can be private. i think we might be able to help you."

Who was the “we”? And why wouldn’t it be safe to talk over Twitter? Dave opened his Tumblr, and sure enough, there was a notification saying he had a message from one “ghostytrickster.” Ignoring the weird username, he tapped to read it.

hey there! first things first, i’m sure that you are wondering who “we” are, as i said on twitter. this app may have private messaging, but i don’t know how secure it really is, so… i can’t tell you the answer. but i can tell you my name if you want. it’s john! don’t call me that, though. it’s too dangerous. call me GT or EB. oh, speaking of which, do you have pesterchum? i bet you do. contact me at ectoBiologist.

Dave raised an eyebrow as he read. John, huh? No surname, and claims of danger. Wasn’t the weirdest thing he’d seen that day.

Usually he never gave out his chumhandle online. He was something of an internet celebrity due to his comics, and if he told people how to contact him, his phone would explode from the number of messages that would pour in. But… Something about this John guy seemed trustworthy.
Plus, Dave doubted anyone would prioritize contacting their favorite comic artist during the apocalypse.

Or maybe they would. Fans were strange, strange creatures.

He entered the handle John had given him into Pesterchum’s search field, then hit “add chum.”

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] --

TG: sup
TG: its john right
EB: hi dave!
EB: i’m glad you decided to talk to me, the others were kind of worried you wouldn’t.
TG: theres that cryptic hint dropping i love
TG: it brings such joy to my heart
TG: who could the others possibly be i wonder with a little thrill
TG: if some dude in a fursuit came up to me and started dropping that level of secretive bullshit id be like well goddamn guess im a furry now
TG: tell me more you mysterious wolf you
TG: anyway what
EB: you’re a very silly guy, dave. :B
EB: but now that we’re communicating in a secure fashion i can tell you everything!
EB: or, most of it at least. what do you want to know?
TG: whos we
EB: “we” is me, TT, and GG. you’ll probably talk to them soon.
TG: why are you being so mysterious
EB: because we are currently being invaded by aliens, and we don’t know if they can hack us.
EB: also we are trying to fight back against said aliens.
TG: okay i guess that makes sense
TG: why are you helping me
EB: personal interest combined with necessity!
EB: you’re on my radar because i read your web comics, and when i saw that you were in austin, i was like sweet, that’s exactly where we need someone right now.
EB: the ship was just over your city, right?
TG: yeah
TG: pretty much blew the whole thing to smithereens
TG: the official dudes that rank being blown up took a look at it and they went hella pale right there
TG: “this is off the charts destruction sir”
TG: “oh really how would you rank it”
TG: “sir this shit is more fire than my mixtape”
TG: “goddamn wed better call in the pros”
TG: thats when i came in and i was like yeah shits basically gone time to move
EB: your tweet said you were trapped in a building with the extraterrestrials. how did you get out?
TG: okay first of all dont say extraterrestrials that just sounds plain nerdy
TG: but yeah i was jacked up in the alien shit
TG: idk man i only saw one and it just kinda let me go after cussing me out and scratching my cheek off
EG: wait, cussing you out?
TG: it looked angry as hell and i swear i heard it say something that sounded like motherfucker
EB: hehehe. that would be pretty funny if it did curse at you. but anyway! can you describe what it looked like?
TG: exactly like a human except grey skin yellow eyes fangs claws and horns
TG: the whole shebang
EB: thanks! nobody’s actually managed to get a picture of one yet so that’s good info. which bring me to my next point…
EB: do you want to join me and the others fighting the aliens?
TG: depends on what id have to do
TG: if you need shitty drawings made im definitely the guy for the job
EB: i was thinking more like feeding us information from the scenes of invasion.
TG: that sounds okay too
TG: as long as i dont die
EB: you wouldn’t be in much danger! you’d just have to get close enough to tell us some things we don’t know. stuff about their technology, for example. any further risk would be your own decision, we won’t pressure you.
TG: i might as well
TG: its not like i have anything else to do
TG: im walking towards where my apartment was and i can already see that its fucking demolished
TG: where would you need me to go
EB: my sources say the ship is currently heading for san antonio. do you have a way to get there?
TG: …
TG: i have never hijacked a car before
TG: but i think i am about to
EB: haha okay.

EB: get a phone charger first though! and make sure you take the kind of car you can plug into. you’ll also want to save as much of your battery as you can even when you have the charger, so try to limit your usage to contacting me or my teammates.

TG: hell no dude what about liveblogging
TG: i gotta document my apocalyptic road trip yo
EB: no!
EB: wait, hold on. let me think.
EB: that actually isn’t a bad idea.
TG: it isnt
TG: ?
EB: you have a big online following. if people see you fighting back, they might get inspired to join us! we need all the help we can get.
TG: so what youre saying is
TG: operation liveblog the apocalypse is officially a go
EB: yes. :B
TG: hell yes
TG: hell fucking yes
TG: all right ill talk to you later ive got tweets to make
EB: wait, not yet! i need to give you the handles for my friends.

EB: they’re tentacleTherapist and gardenGnostic. talk to TT if you want more information about what we’re doing and how you fit into it, she’ll throw in a free psychoanalysis. talk to GG if you want a friend!
TG: ill do that
TG: check ya later john

TG: shit wait i mean eb

TG: see im learning the lingo already

-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB] --

Dave stood in front of what had formerly been his apartment building. Mostly, he was thinking about how all his mixing gear had been crushed.

He was also thinking a little bit about his brother.

If anyone could survive a building exploding, it was Bro. Dave imagined him crawling from the wreckage, his pointy shades still gleaming. There was no way he was dead. He would turn up eventually. It would probably be in some kind of shitty ironic way, but he’d turn up. Dave was never sure of how he felt about Bro. Of course he didn’t want the guy dead, but the idea of him popping up again sent a twinge of discomfort through Dave’s stomach.

San Antonio would be the perfect distraction. This John kid and his friends, well… Against that giant ship, Dave didn’t think they stood a chance. Who knew how big this alien army could be? How could three, maybe four kids go up against that? But it would give him a reason to keep moving, and maybe he would turn out to be wrong. Maybe he would help Earth make its big comeback.

Dave Strider, hero of the day. Wouldn’t that be hilarious.

However, in order to be anything more than a brat on the street, he’d need a car. There were plenty around him. The trouble was finding one that wasn’t destroyed, and getting around the fallen buildings.

Dave turned away from his former apartment building, thinking over his situation. San Antonio was about an hour and a half from Austin, not too bad. He’d driven longer distances to get away from Bro during his rebellious teenage phase.

The trips hadn’t done him any good when he’d gotten home, but he didn’t like to think about that.

It seemed like every car Dave looked at was too wrecked to drive. One was thrown against the side of a building, the windshield smeared with blood. Another looked like a tin can that had been stepped on. He approached one that looked acceptable, only to lift the hood and find the battery charred beyond repair.

Time for Plan B.

He would walk to the edge of the city, where there was less rubble to avoid, and then he would find a car. Hopefully there would be more to offer once he relocated.

Walking the city took a long time, but certainly less than it would have if there was still traffic to deal with. Dave jogged easily across what would have been red lights. His backpack straps dug painfully into his shoulders, and he shifted the weight from one side to the other. It may have been an inconvenience, but no way in hell was he letting any of that precious food go.

After a while of running, he cracked open a water bottle and downed it in less than thirty seconds. He stuffed the empty bottle into his backpack. He was a store looter, yes, but not a litterer.
That reminded him. He kept running, but this time, he kept an eye out for any convenient corner stores. There was one down the street, and he popped inside, quickly locating the phone chargers and snagging one.

When he stepped back outside, he realized he could see the city limits, framed by a wide expanse of desert. Beyond the buildings and complexes came the sand and the rock. The no-man’s-land. The backdrop of a story too important to be understood.

Dave liked the desert. He liked traveling across it. It gave him time to himself, and he could play his music as loud as he liked, and drive for miles without having anything to worry about. He was already mapping out a playlist as he searched for a suitable car. Or, shit. Should he listen to John about phone battery?

Compromise. He would listen to music for only half the drive.

Thankfully, the car he found was empty. He wouldn’t have to be touching any corpses today. Dave slid into the driver’s seat, turning the key in the ignition and smiling as the car started with a rumble. His smile grew as he pressed his foot down on the gas. With no traffic, he could go as fast as he wanted.

He took off with a whoop and a squeal of tires.

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For the first forty five minutes, Dave drove in silence. He allowed his thoughts to be his entertainment. After that, he plugged in his phone and turned up the Snoop Dogg. Or, Snoop Lion. (He murmured an apology when he realized his mistake. Sorry, my nizzle, but the Dogg can’t just be renamed like that).

But there was more to do than listen to music. Since there were no other cars to worry about hitting, opening Pesterchum and texting came with no moral qualms. Dave searched for “tentacleTherapist.”

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] --

TG: hey

TG: youre the information one right

TT: I was wondering when you would decide to contact me. Yes, I am “the information one.”

TT: I assume you have a question?

TG: i have lots of questions but mostly im just bored

TG: whats up

TT: Global death rate.

TG: jesus christ

TG: weve got a dark humorist over here goddamn

TT: Yes. I take pride in it.

TG: so whats your name
TG: unless you're not gonna tell me because it's too dangerous or whatever

TT: It's all right. I can tell you, as long as we don't use them too frequently. Though first names alone are relatively safe, acronyms are in general a better idea. That will be the last time I refer to you by name.

TT: My name is Rose. It's nice to meet you, Dave.

TG: okay

TG: here's my question

TG: what am I going to need to do when I get to San Antonio

TG: sneak a sample of alien blood for the sciences

TG: try to decipher the language

TG: hack into their databases to find their stash of xenoporn

TT: I don't mean to be rude, but I sincerely doubt your ability to accomplish any of those things… Though they would be helpful.

TG: wait why would alien porn be helpful what the fuck

TT: Shhh.

TT: Don't question it.

TG: I'm suddenly reevaluating my entire life

TT: A good thing to do during the apocalypse. I tried my hand at it not long ago before I was interrupted with notions of rebellion.

TG: oh yeah that reminds me I have another question

TG: howd you meet John and GG

TG: *EB and GG sorry

TT: I met EB at a convention a few years ago, and we kept in contact afterwards. GG is his cousin.

TG: hahaha you fuckin nerd

TG: was it an anime con

TG: holy shit did you cosplay

TT: EB did. He went as the protagonist of the Ghostbusters franchise. I have pictures, if I ever have the opportunity to show you in person. I'd rather not send the files.

TT: You'll probably get to see them soon.

TG: what do you mean

TG: do you live in Texas or something
TT: No. In fact, I live very far from it. But I’m on my way there as we speak.

TG: how

TT: Much the same as you, only I’ll have to drink a lot of coffee in order to keep going.

TG: and you can’t tell me where you’re coming from

TT: No. Strictly speaking, we shouldn’t even be talking about your home state. It is by virtue of necessity alone that we do so.

TG: wait so are the others coming too

TT: Yes. I should arrive about half a day before them.

TT: But this conversation has derailed. Bringing the topic of your mission back to light, you are going to be our observer for the time being, as well as our media.

TT: You will be asked to take notes on the aliens’ behavior and weaponry. There are several questions we must answer before we can strategize against them. Are they a hive mind? How strong are their defenses? How many are their numbers? How do their minds work?

TT: These are only a few.

TG: oh yeah i forgot you’re the psychology one too

TG: so i just report shit to you and you analyze it basically

TT: Yes. But your own opinions and theories will also be greatly valued.

TT: Pictures would come in handy as well.

TG: eb told me i should liveblog this is that a good idea

TT: It’s amusing that you need me to verify his claims. Yes, you should. Do not ever mention me or the others, or anything we are doing, but simply post motivational phrases and photos.

TG: like

TG: hang in there buddy there’s a chance you might not die

TT: Actually, with your typical sarcastic persona, that could be encouraging.

TT: Perhaps something a bit more genuine-sounding, though. For example: a selfie of you with the war in the background, captioned as “don’t let the aliens run you over they’re weak and they suck mad dick you got this man”

TT: (That was purely hypothetical. We are aware of neither their resilience nor their capability to suck dick. That’s your department).

TG: wait

TG: what

TT: I’m kidding.

TG: you have an alien fetish don’t you
TG: i see right through you

TT: You’ve known me less than an hour, and you’re already pondering my fetishes. One might see this is a hallmark of romantic or sexual interest. Is this normal for you, or have you been raised in a traumatic environment that would make you turn to hypersexuality as a coping mechanism?

TG: fucking

TG: fuck no stop doing that

TT: I’ll have mercy, just this once. Moving on. Does this job description sound adequate to you?

TG: yeah sure

TG: like of course im not pissing myself with excitement over the idea of getting up close and personal with aliens that obviously want to murder me

TG: but it wont be that dangerous like you said and i literally have nothing else to do

TG: my apartment doesnt exist anymore

TG: my only relative is nowhere to be found

TG: and if im sitting there not doing anything im just gonna feel like a doomed sack of shit

TG: so im all in

TT: I’m sorry.

TG: dont be its whatever

TG: ill talk to you again when ive got info to give

TG: and then i guess ill see you when you get here

TT: Take care of yourself, Dave.

TG: i thought i was tg now

TT: You are.

TT: But sometimes, a little familiarity can make the worst situations bearable.

TT: Be safe.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] --

Dave wasn’t sure whether that conversation had been pleasant or uncomfortable.

A distraction presented itself in the sight of a city, crawling closer along the horizon. Even from a distance Dave could see that it was in the process of being destroyed. Flashes of light and flame lit up the silhouettes of buildings as they collapsed. The explosions were like fireworks in the night sky.

The battleship that had fired down upon his city now did the same to this one. It loomed like a red thundercloud, jets of light occasionally shooting from its bow. Dave gripped the steering wheel tightly, but kept driving towards it.
It was not the only thing firing. Shots that looked tiny from this far away but were undoubtedly lethal burst through the air like sparks. Dave recalled the gun Mr. Pissy Grey Guy had carried. He guessed that the weapon fired similar energy bursts to that of the ship, and that was what he was now witnessing. Any humans left in San Antonio were surely having a bad time.

But there was more. Trundling across the ground were machines, only visible by their silhouettes. Tanks.

Jesus. Apparently the U.S. military was taking a stand.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] --

TG: are you aware that there are tanks currently fucking shit up in san antonio

TG: or more accurately getting fucked up

TG: im too far to see that well but even i can tell things aint goin well for uncle sam

TT: I know. It’s all under control.

TG: …

TG: okay then

-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] --

Dave didn’t know why Rose and John thought they could go against the invaders when even the military was having a tough time of it, but then again, he didn’t know much of anything anymore. Whatever. He would keep moving. He had to.

And if the cost of his movement was placing his trust in others, well… He’d just have to deal.
Karkat woke to the sound of an explosion.

He yawned and blinked sleepily, sitting up. Sometime during the night he had curled up next to Kanaya, and he smiled to see her still resting. She looked so peaceful.

But the scene outside was less than peaceful. Judging by the noise, the battle must still be raging. Karkat was more than a little surprised that the humans had survived the night. He looked outside and immediately regretted the decision. His glance nuggets burned with the bright sunlight, and he could not stop the strangled howl of pain from escaping his chitinous windhole.

Kanaya stirred at the sound. Before she could look out into the sun, Karkat plonked her helmet onto her nugbone. He hissed as the afterimage of the sun danced across his vision. It burned like fuck, and no matter how furiously he blinked, his glance nuggets stung with the lingering pain.

“Is it morning?” Kanaya murmured. She took a breath and seemed to fully awake. She sat up and looked at Karkat. Her gentle smile quickly turned to a frown as she noticed his grimace. “What has happened to you?”

“Looked into the sun by accident. No big deal, it just hurts.”

She looked reproachful. “You must take better care of yourself. Though it is my duty to care for you, it is better for the both of us if you are not perpetually injured.”

“I know, I know.” Karkat glanced around the vehicle. The others looked to be still asleep. That wouldn’t do, they had a battle to participate in. Once he secured his visor, he could squint out the window and see the Imperial battleship, still hovering over the city.

“Wake up, shitsnorkelers,” he said loudly.

“Already up,” Sollux grunted. Karkat leaned forward to see him slumped, but awake, in the front seat. He had his helmet on already.

“What are you doing?”

“The function ath threenth ath well ath thunglatheth.” Sollux pointed to his visor. “I’m watching the camerath in the thity tho I can thee the fight. The humanth have thome pretty thtrong weaponth, I’ve got to admit. If the Condeth didn’t have thuch thtrong defentheth they actually might thtand a chanthe againtht her.”

“Then we should go help.” Karkat reached into the back seat to shove Terezi. “Wake up,
She coughed in his face. “Mmmm. Don’t wanna.”

Karkat made as if to shake Terezi awake, then shook Vriska instead. “Get your lazy shitsack of a moirail up,” he ordered her. “It’s fighting time.”

Vriska slowly opened one glance nugget, looking completely unimpressed. “We’ll get up when we want to. The war isn’t going anywhere.”

Karkat huffed. “All the humans will be dead before we get the chance to kill any of them! Eridan, wake up, your team’s being lazy.”

Karkat’s memories of the night before ended with him telling Eridan to stop the vehicle and take a rest. It was a good thing he had, for the driver had conked out the second he pulled over. Now, he was slumped against the steering wheel, snoring. He groaned as Karkat poked him in the side repeatedly.

“’M almost up, Kar…” Eridan’s face slipped down the wheel and a loud honk erupted from it. He shrieked and sat bolt upright. “I’m awake!”

Sollux snickered.

“Come on, guys.” Karkat swung the side door open and stuck out his hand to test the sunlight. The material of his armor protected his skin from burns just as well as it had the previous day, and he stepped out into the deadly rays, wincing even with his visor down.

The others gradually piled out and fell into formation behind Eridan. They were close enough to the city to walk to it, and to drive up would be foolish. The battleship might see their human vehicle and shoot it down. They traveled haltingly, climbing over rubble and ducking as explosions shook the ground, finally getting a good ways into the city.

Eridan pulled out his blaster. “Here’s the plan,” he announced. “We’ll comb the streets along with the other squadrons currently in action. If we see a human, we shoot it. If one of the human war machines comes along, we tackle it as a group. Do not go out of my sight, we don’t want to be separated. And no one is to take on a tank alone.” He shot a pointed look at Vriska. “Am I being clear enough?”

“Yes,” they chorused. Karkat slowly retrieved his weapon, relishing in the feeling of clicking the safety off. This time he would use it. This time, he would end lives.

Down the street, another squad rounded the corner. Their leader, with a purple insignia stitched onto his chest, beckoned his underlings to follow. They ran after. Eridan nodded to his own team, and they fell into step behind the group of strangers. He caught up to their leader and exchanged a few words. Then he turned back.

“There’s a human base set up a few blocks down. We’re going to go in with these guys and raid it for supplies, killing anyone in our way. Then we’ll blow it up.”

Terezi made a face. “Why bother with supplies? Their food is probably gross. We don’t even know if it’s edible, considering we’ve got different biology.”

The leader of the other team looked at her scornfully. “Next time think a little before using that tone towards your superiors. We’re taking their supplies specifically to analyze them and see if they can be put to use, idiot.”
Terezi looked shocked as the purple-blooded troll turned away.

“Damn. I never thought I’d be glad to have Mr. Eggplant as a leader, but…”

“Do not address these people the same way you would one of your friends,” Kanaya warned. “Our friend group has always been remarkably tolerant. Many of our typical quips could and will be considered insubordination by highbloods.”

Vriska sniffed. “I don’t care what grade of shit you’ve got for blood, if you want me to respect you, you’d better fucking earn it.”

Karkat shoved her. “Shut your ignorance tunnel, you’re talking about as loud as the speaker of the vast glub.” Vriska rolled her eyes, but stopped talking.

A rustblood from the other squadron darted down the block, peered around the corner, and hissed back: “All clear!”

The two teams moved in tandem with their blasters at the ready. Around the corner, they found a deceptively innocent-looking storefront. The only thing giving it away was the rifle peeking out from behind the counter.

“Go,” Eridan breathed.

The teams stormed the base, firing in unison before rushing through the door. Glass shattered around them as they came inside. Upstairs, many voices raised into a chorus of shouts, and there was a loud rumble as their owners came running down the stairs. Humans. They stumbled down the stairs and into the store. Many of them brandished makeshift weapons, hammers or bats. But one woman raised a rifle of respectable quality. Karkat snarled and fired at her.

She ducked and rolled behind a shelf. Karkat’s blast singed a hole into the tile floor where she had been standing moments before. Damn it.

Jets of light flew through the air around him, and he narrowly avoided a shot to the neck as he rounded the shelf. He was pretty sure that his armor would protect him if he were hit, but it was an uncomfortably close shave, and he glanced all around before moving again. Terezi was whacking a human around the head with her cane. Vriska kicked another’s legs out from under it as it swung a hammer much too heavy for it to use. Eridan stood calmly behind the register, firing his blaster into the mayhem, and to Karkat’s surprise, Sollux was on his other side, guarding him against assault. But where was Kanaya?

Oh, there she was. Karkat breathed a sigh of relief. She was mowing down all those who dared approach her, and the humans quickly learned that the troll with a chainsaw was not someone to mess with. They cowered back, eyes wide, as she drew closer.

It was lucky Kanaya was such a kind person. She could have killed them with a much deeper and more painful cut, but she opted instead to dispose of them with a quick switch of her blade.

The squadron they had come with was already heading up the stairs. Karkat was left to deal with those humans not in range of his teammates. The pesky girl with the gun had stolen away somewhere-- where had she gone?

“Die, alien!”

There she was. Karkat didn’t even blink as he fired at her. Stupid human, didn’t you know you should never announce your presence? She was knocked to the ground, and Karkat cursed under his
breath. He had forgotten to switch the blaster from stun mode to kill mode. He flipped the switch and advanced on her, kicking her gun out of her hands and smirking as she backed away.

He aimed straight between her glance nuggets. One shot, and she’d be dead.

She looked so much more fearful than Dave had.

Karkat swallowed. He shouldn’t be thinking about that right now. His failure with the Dave human was exactly why he had to succeed now! This thing’s pitiful weeping stirred no guilt in his pump biscuit. Its wails for mercy were nothing. This human was just another woolbeast in a sea of livestock, and its extermination would mean nothing but success for Karkat. It would mean nothing but good.

That was what he told himself as he pulled the trigger.

He looked away once it was done. He couldn’t bring himself to gaze upon the bloody hole in its nugbone. It was just because of the red blood. It was a pleasure to look upon the pain of his enemies, sure, but this injury had been particularly gory, and he didn’t like to see it. That was all. It was nothing.

Just the red blood.

The other humans had been taken care of by his teammates, and Kanaya took his prong in hers before they followed the other squad up the stairs.

“You appear to be upset,” she whispered. “Is everything all right?”

“I’m fine,” he muttered. “Don’t worry about me.”

Her face said that she was not obeying in the least, so Karkat picked up his pace and climbed ahead of her to avoid her pity. When he reached the top of the stairs, he found the other squad’s haughty leader waiting.

“ Took you long enough,” the purple-blood sniffed. “We’ve already found most of their stores and taken the samples we need.”

“Good. That way we can get goin’ sooner,” Eridan replied. He turned around and descended without another word.

The other group loudly explained the details of what they had found as they walked. They had a yellow-blood female with them who would simply not shut up about human medicine.

“We don’t know what this one does yet, it wasn’t labeled, but it’s mostly made of isobutylphenyl propanoic acid, so it’s probably some sort of healing drug. That means humans must have some sort of immune system similar to ours, but it would likely be weaker because—”

An indigo-blood whacked her upside the nugbone. “Would you shut up? Nobody wants to hear about your lame analyses! Just keep it to yourself until you find something useful.”

Karkat had been thinking the same thing, but he felt a little bad to see the hurt expression on the girl’s face. She looked down dejectedly as she passed the last step and followed her leader through the first level of the store. She didn’t seem to want comfort, so he banished the idea of smacking her and telling her to shape up, as any caring troll would.

Instead, he thought about how shitty human bases were. They must have known an attack was
coming, but their defenses were so terrible! And the supplies had been so badly hidden. It was a
wonder that somewhere out there, more of the species were fighting against the Alternian empire.
Karkat shook his nugbone in disgust as he opened the door.

He stopped abruptly when he noticed the scene outside.

In the street, yet another squadron had appeared, and was locked in battle with a group of humans.
Karkat was shocked to see one of the trolls injured. There was a gash in his armor, and olive blood
was spilling forth. He stumbled, and one of his teammates rushed to his aid, only to be hit by a bullet.
It did not break through her armor, but it sent her reeling. The human who had shot her used the
opportunity to punch her in the face.

“What are you waiting for?” Eridan shouted to his squadron. They leaped forth.

Time seemed to slow as Karkat scanned the area.

An oliveblood, a tealblood, and a maroonblood. Another maroonblood. A rustblood, and the leader
was violet, so that was the whole squadron. Two were injured. One was falling back. What the hell
did they think they were doing, losing like this?

Eight humans. Two with guns, one with bare fists, the others wielding random objects in a
threatening manner. They shouldn’t have been gaining ground. Even though they outnumbered the
trolls, they were still just a weak bunch of aliens! But no matter. Karkat would set them right. He
looked down to his side for his blaster, and his eyes fell upon a human vehicle, crumpled at the edge
of the road.

Beneath it, something shifted. Something that looked like the form of a human or troll…

Well, whatever it was, Karkat would show it that it had everything to fear. He whipped out his
blaster and plunged into the fray. The humans were scurrying all around, suddenly aware that they
were outnumbered by a wide margin. He stuck out his frond and tripped one up. It fell to the ground
and looked up at him, petrified. It began to cry. As he bared his fangs, it sobbed out a single syllable
in its vacuous language.

Fuck. It was another one he recognized.

“Please.”

It was begging for him to spare its life. And for a second, he considered it.

He considered it. What the hell was he doing? What was he, some sort of alien sympathizer? That
kind of thinking would get him killed! Everything was going wrong. First his blood, then Dave, then
Karkat’s continued reluctance to kill. He had to shape up before things took a turn for the worse.

He couldn’t afford to be weak about this anymore, damn it. He couldn’t allow himself to hesitate. He
had no reason to.

It was time to get serious.

A numbness began to spread through Karkat’s body. It was a tingling sensation, and as he raised his
blaster, he could hardly feel the movement. He could see perfectly well, but the sight of the human
screaming in fear before him did not compute. It did not register. He pulled the trigger, and human
after human fell to his will. Their bright red blood scorched his glance nuggets and filled his vision.
He destroyed, he killed, he blew red holes in their delicate flesh--
And he stopped.

Kanaya was shaking him and saying something in a worried voice. He didn’t like to hear her worried.

He dimly realized that he was firing into a bloody mass that could no longer rightly be called a corpse. Had he done that?

Karkat looked around, his senses beginning to come back to him. The humans were all dead. The other trolls were staring at him with looks ranging from concern to disgust. And that machine....

If he squinted, he could still see something beneath the vehicle. Someone. Were they dead? Or just hiding? A beam of light flashed from something where the head would be. Karkat opened his mouth to voice a concern, but his voice ceased to function. He frowned and tried again. This time he managed a faint noise, but it was not communication. Kanaya stepped up and allowed him to lean against her.

He knocked into her, swayed, and felt the world go black.

***

“He has been acting odd since docking, but I have no idea why. He has avoided any attempts on my part to ease his stress.”

“The fuck? You’re supposed to be his moirail. If he’s not tellin’ you what’s up, somethin’s wrong.”

The voices were fuzzy, but familiar. Karkat focused on the sounds.

“I will have a talk with him as soon as he wakes up. We cannot proceed like this.”

That was Kanaya.

“No shit we can’t proceed like this. I’d never hold somethin’ like that against him, he’s obviously got somethin’ goin’ on, but now we’re one team when we could have been two. There was no way those guys were gonna stick around once they saw Kar flippin’ his shit.”

And that was Eridan.

“Is it so bad that we are alone? We are perfectly capable fighters, and their leader did seem quite threatening.”

“Strength in numbers, Kan. You’re always better off with more trolls on your side.”

What were they talking about?

Karkat’s glance nugget lids were heavy. He slowly opened one, his gaze rolling around the area. The angle told him that he was lying in the street. The squadron they had fought with had vanished, and it was only his friends that he saw milling about. Them, and the corpses. He felt as though he would be sick.

There was blood everywhere. It stained the streets and the clothes of the fallen. It no longer oozed from their bodies, but rested, in puddles of red. He had done that. Something about the sight felt so criminally wrong, but it was more than just their blood. Karkat had done something awful.

But this wasn’t awful, he reminded himself. This was exactly what it meant to be a troll.
He lurched to a sitting position, leaned over, and vomited.

Kanaya was at his side instantly. She stroked his hair as he retched, and patted his back when his sickness diminished into dry coughs. He spit out a gob of saliva. Great, now his squawk gaper tasted disgusting.

“Karkat,” she said gently. “I think we need to have a talk.”

Karkat was silent.

“It is no use pretending you are all right. Whatever is going on, I promise you, I can help. Nothing is going to scare me away. I just want you to be healthy.”

He sighed. “Fine.” His meal tunnel burned as he spoke. “But I don’t want these shitstains listening in.” He jerked his head in the direction of the rest of his team.

Kanaya nodded in understanding and pulled out her palmhusk.

-- grimAuxiliatrix [GA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

GA: So

GA: What Happened Back There

CG: I MADE A MISTAKE, AND THEN I MADE UP FOR IT.

GA: Being Cryptic Is No Use

GA: It Only Serves To Delay An Inevitable Conversation

CG: FINE.

CG: DO YOU REMEMBER THAT STORE WITH ALL THE CARPENTRY SUPPLIES?

GA: Yes

CG: THERE WAS A BASEMENT. I WENT DOWN TO IT, AND THERE WAS A HUMAN HIDING.

GA: Go On

CG: I DIDN’T KILL IT.

CG: I LET IT GO. I DON’T FUCKING KNOW WHY, I DON’T KNOW WHAT CAME OVER ME, IT WAS SO STUPID. I SHOULD’VE SHOT THE THING THE SECOND I SAW IT. WHAT KIND OF SOLDIER AM I IF I CAN’T EVEN KILL ONE ALIEN?

CG: AND THEN TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, IT ALMOST HAPPENED AGAIN. I ALMOST DIDN’T PULL THE TRIGGER WHEN WE WERE FIGHTING BACK THERE IN THE HUMAN BASE. I MEAN, WHAT THE FUCK, RIGHT? I KNOW I SHOULD WANT TO KILL EVERYTHING ON THIS DESPICABLE PLANET, BUT SOMETHING’S STOPPING ME. I FUCKING HATE IT.

GA: Oh Karkat

GA: It Is Perfectly Fine To Have Moral Reservations
GA: I Myself Find The Violence Of This Invasion Distasteful But I Do What I Must

GA: I Will Help You Do The Same

CG: I NEVER SAID I HAD MORAL RESERVATIONS!!

CG: I’M NOT LIKE THAT. I’M NOT SOME WEAKSAUCE DOOFUS WHO CAN’T EVEN PLUCK UP THE COURAGE TO KILL.

GA: Lack Of Courage And Presence Of Moral Are Two Different Things

CG: WHATEVER. I DON’T HAVE ANY “MORAL RESERVATIONS.” I WANT TO KILL THESE ALIENS MORE THAN ANYTHING, BECAUSE THEN THERE WOULD BE A CHANCE IN HELL THAT I WAS NORMAL. THAT I WAS WORTH SOMETHING.

CG: AND I KNOW I HAVE IT IN ME TO GET IT DONE, I DO HAVE THE COURAGE. BUT SOMETHING’S GETTING IN MY WAY.

GA: Perhaps That Something Is Virtue

CG: THAT’S THE SAME FUCKING THING AS MORALS AND WE ALREADY ESTABLISHED THAT I DON’T HAVE THOSE.

GA: Sometimes We Do Not Wish To Confront Our True Motives

CG: I’M TELLING YOU MY “TRUE MOTIVES.” I DON’T KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENING TO ME.

GA: Do You Not Think It Possible That You Are Averse To The Act Of Killing

GA: It Would Be Unusual Yes But It Is Not Unheard Of For Trolls To Think This Way

GA: I Assume You Are Feeling Conflicted Because Our Society Prompts You To Murder But You Do Not Want To

GA: Combined With The Stress Of Wishing To Prove Yourself Because Of Your Blood It Must Be An Awfully Large Burden To Bear

GA: You Feel Inadequate

GA: Am I Correct

CG: NO.

CG: STOP DOING THAT.

GA: It Is My Job As Your Moirail To Assist You With Your Emotions

GA: Please Let Me Act Accordingly

CG: …

GA: What

CG: YOU’VE NEVER SAID IT BEFORE. NEITHER OF US HAVE.

GA: I Figured It Was Time To Stop Dancing Around The Word
GA: We Have Both Known The Nature Of Our Relationship For Quite Some Time

GA: So

GA: Is It Okay If We Are Official Then

CG: I THOUGHT YOU’D NEVER ASK. OF COURSE IT’S OKAY, KANAYA. IT’S BETTER THAN OKAY.

GA: Okay Yes That Is Good

CG: YOUR FACE IS ALL GREEN.

GA: Hush

GA: Do Not Think You Have Distracted Me I Still Want To Talk About Your Situation

CG: SIGH.

CG: IS IT REALLY THAT BIG A DEAL?


GA: It Was Not Like You

CG: OH, RIGHT. THAT.

CG: OKAY I DON’T KNOW WHAT THAT WAS AND I’M BEING COMPLETELY HONEST ABOUT MY LACK OF KNOWLEDGE THIS TIME.

GA: So You Were Not Being Honest Before

CG: WE BOTH KNOW I’M NOT GOING TO RESPOND TO THAT SO LET’S JUST PRETEND YOU NEVER SAID ANYTHING.

GA: Do You Think It Will Happen Again

CG: NO. FUCK, I HOPE NOT. THAT WAS CREEPY IN HINDSIGHT.

GA: If You Are On The Verge Of Another Mental Breakdown I Will Need you To Tell Me

CG: I DID NOT HAVE A MENTAL BREAKDOWN.

GA: We Both Know You Do Not Want Me To Respond To That So Let Us Just Pretend You Never Said Anything

GA: Please Tell Me If You Ever Become Overwhelmed

CG: FINE. FOR YOU.

GA: Thank You

GA: Are You Feeling Any Better

GA: If Not I Am Available To Provide Paps
CG: FUCK NO. I DON’T WANT TO BE THAT ONE COUPLE WITH THE GROSS PDA.
CG: (MAYBE LATER. IN PRIVATE.)

GA: Yes Of Course
GA: Shall We Go Back To Verbal Interaction Then

CG: YEAH. IT’S GETTING WEIRD SITTING HERE AND TYPING WHILE EVERYONE TRIES TO ACT LIKE THEY’RE NOT WATCHING.

GA: Yes It Really Is
GA: Thank You For Talking With Me Karkat

CG: I ONLY DID IT BECAUSE YOU LOOKED CONCERNED AS ALL FUCK.
CG: STUPID MOIRAIL GETTING ME ALL WORRIED FOR YOUR WELL-BEING.

GA: That Is Kind Of The Point Of Moirallegiance
CG: I KNOW.

CG: <>

GA: <>

-- grimAuxiliatrix [GA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” said Karkat. “Why are we even still sitting here in this corpse pile?” He stood up.

“I did not know how wise it would be to move you,” Kanaya admitted. “I apologize for confining us to such a… messy area.”

“Messy is an understatement.” Karkat searched for somewhere to cast his gaze that wasn’t splattered with gore. It was a surprisingly difficult task. Finally, his glance nuggets found a wrecked human vehicle that was relatively clean. It was the same one he had seen before… But this time there was nothing beneath it.

Although the form he had seen may well have been a hallucination or some shit. After his little episode, it could have been anything.

He kept his glance nuggets trained to it as he walked over, stepping around puddles of blood.

He crouched down and peered beneath the vehicle. Nothing. Only pavement and droplets of oil. He sat back up, puzzled. Maybe he really had been hallucinating.

But that flash of light had seemed so real. Right where a troll or a human’s glance nuggets would have been, the beam reflected off of some shiny surface, like a pair of glasses.

Like a pair of sunglasses.

Karkat took a sharp breath.

There was no way. There was absolutely no fucking way that human had followed him. It was
impossible. He wouldn’t allow it. Dave was too idiotic, too stupid and repulsive and witless to have followed. Why would he even want to? Did he want Karkat to finish him off?

No, there was simply no way. Karkat steadied his breathing and stood up again. He gave Kanaya a falsely bright smile. “Let’s get going.”

Eridan coughed. “Well. Now that we’ve had a bit of experience, accompanied by the necessary feelin’s jam, the human military awaits us. The biggest fight’s across the city. It’s almost night again, so we might need a rest, but we can get in some good shots first. Fall in!”

“Don’t say ‘fall in,’” Vriska said disdainfully. “You can’t pull it off.” Eridan ignored her and waited for his group to gather around him. He took the lead, and they set off down the street.

Karkat’s thoughts lay elsewhere. If Dave had somehow followed them, his cockiness would be his downfall. How dare he come back after Karkat had warned him so clearly! Karkat was going to snap his shades and shoot him, and the thought did not make him feel sick again, no sir.

Maybe the shooting could wait. First, he would enjoy tormenting the human. He would crack those stupid shades, even more than they already were, tear all Dave’s possessions to pieces, and laugh as the human cried. There. That image sent a flare of hot satisfaction through his pump biscuit.

Whatever mental blockage it was that kept Karkat from feeling happy when killing, it could fuck right off. He was just as wicked as any other troll. Anyone would let a human go in order to fuck with it more, right? It was the utmost form of torture. It was justified.

Karkat contented himself with images of the blond human in fits of pain as he walked. Dave’s red blood would be pleasant, as long as he was living. It was the death that would make it so intolerable. But Karkat wasn’t thinking about that. He was thinking about Dave, beaten down and broken. The human would look up in a pitiful attempt to fight back, and Karkat would punch him in his stupid face. The very thought made him feel so pleased, and so very, very angry.

If Dave dared to come near Karkat again, he was going to suffer.

And it would be incredible.
Teenage Rebellion

Chapter Summary

"Silent alarms are ringing,
Sounds of revolt draw near
A new united front
That you will come to fear
We will hold together
To become the change
Voice for the voiceless
With every common man engaged"

- The Resistance, Anberlin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dave thought he had been prepared to witness the invasion.

He was wrong.

From the moment he entered the city, he couldn’t stand it. He couldn’t just do nothing as he watched the place collapse. He contacted Rose on multiple occasions to tell her he was going to fight, only to be rebuked. He was on a mission of espionage, not warfare, Rose reminded him. He must wait for the others to arrive before leaping into the fray.

He only very reluctantly obeyed.

His katana was now a constant presence in his hand. With every street he walked, he was on the alert, ready to dive for cover or fend for his life. These aliens were fucking brutal. It had only taken one battle for him to see that.

It could hardly have been called a battle, really. There had been two humans against an entire group of aliens. With only a few shots, the humans had been lying dead with their guts spilling out. If Dave had only a slightly weaker stomach, he would have puked.

Now, he was tailing a particularly nasty group of invaders. They appeared to follow a leader, a tall guy with some kind of purple thing embroidered on what Dave now realized was a uniform. This invasion was systematic. It was calculated, with groups and leaders and uniforms…

It was going to be a bitch to stand up to.

Dave’s personal operation was sneakier. He would wait until the group had swarmed an area, (his stomach clenching every time he stood back and watched a human die), then he would follow. He moved slowly and carefully. He had to. If he was discovered, he’d end up as a splatter on the pavement.
It didn’t feel like he was doing much, but Rose seemed pleased enough by his investigations, in her weirdly subdued manner.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] --

TG: progress report

TG: still following this team of assholes

TG: literally nothing of interest has happened but i bet youll find some way to get all fucking intrigued about it am i right

TT: Have you managed to recognize any recurring syllables of their language?

TG: nope it all just sounds like bullshit to me

TG: i seriously doubt i could make any of those sounds if i tried

TG: its like

TG: kkkhhr akh sshhkng ickhh

TG: (that was me making throat noises just now)

TG: although actually the german language is a thing so maybe we can make those sounds

TT: That’s all right. Translation is a long process, and it’s a bit of a lofty goal for a small and young group such as ours.

TT: If anyone could do it, it would be GG. She has more resources than the rest of us combined. We’ll have to wait for her to arrive to tackle that task.

TG: whens she getting here

TT: A while after me. She’s traveling with John.

TT: It was a gigantic stroke of luck that we’ll be able to meet up with her, actually. If she hadn’t been visiting her cousin, she would currently be across an ocean from us.

TT: She might have been safer there… The only other inhabitant of where she lives is her grandfather, maybe they could have escaped extraterrestrial attention. But we’ll certainly need her help.

TG: her grandpa huh

TG: wait wait what about your parents

TG: and ebs

TG: you said you were driving to texas and that itd be a long ass trip how the fuck are you doing that alone

TT: My mother disappeared when the invasion began, presumably to visit the liquor store. She didn’t come back.

TG: damn
TT: EB’s father has also disappeared, and we haven’t heard anything from GG’s grandfather.

TG: well isn’t this just a clusterfuck of familial abandonment

TT: It really is. Anyway, have you gotten any pictures of the aliens?

TG: yeah tons

-- turntechGodhead [TG] sent tentacleTherapist [TT] the file “bitcheswithguns.jpeg” --

-- turntechGodhead [TG] sent tentacleTherapist [TT] the file “uncomfortablyclosecloseup.jpeg” --

TG: there’s more on my twitter if you wanna look

TT: I’ve been keeping track of it. You’re doing very well; judging by the responses of your fans, your quips are actually giving them hope.

TG: hahaha oh man

TG: i just

TG: idk thats funny to me for some reason

TT: Hmm. Why do you think that might be?

TG: i dunno its just weird that some sarcastic half joking half sincere declaration of hope by a guy on the internet would make people feel better

TG: like honestly who in their right mind is going to take my word for it that any of us will be okay

TG: i cant predict the future

TG: if you die you die man i cant change that

TT: That’s an awfully pessimistic viewpoint.

TG: im just being realistic over here

TT: Do you not think that, once given hope, people will fight with renewed vigor to stay alive?

TG: yeah of course but there’s such thing as too much vigor

TG: if they run headlong into a group of aliens they’re going to die

TT: I don’t know if people will be inclined to take it that far. Merely confirming that they are alive and well may do more good than you believe.

TT: I’m wondering what led you to take on this mindset. Did you happen to be raised in an unsure environment? One in which you could only expect to be hurt?

TG: wait fuck

TG: god damnit is this the psychoanalysis eb talked about

TG: stop reading so far into this im just being honest

TG: im off to take more hot alien pix bye
The group Dave was tailing had upped their pace. He crept between wrecked cars like a cat, making sure to stay out of sight, but keeping them well within earshot.

From an adjacent street, another group appeared. They seemed to have a leader too, and the two bigshots talked before nodding to their respective teams. Dave was never going to get used to how human their gestures were.

One of them ran ahead down the street, looked around the corner, and came back. A scout? Yeah. The aliens moved as a collective mass down to where it had looked, then turned the bend. Since he wasn’t visible to them anymore, Dave permitted himself to run after them without hiding.

They were edging towards a shop on the edge of the road. Their guns were raised… In a flash, they exploded towards the shop, and the windows blew out. The interior was instantly filled with the sounds of battle. There were some human screams, and some guttural, alien shouts. Over all else could be heard the sound of gunfire.

Dave crawled underneath a car, cursing under his breath. He couldn’t go in there, he reminded himself. He had no weapon and no protection. Whatever humans were in there, he couldn’t help. He wouldn’t be able to save them.

A few minutes after they disappeared inside, a band of humans stumbled into view. Dave was just about to reveal himself and offer to lend them a hand when he saw the aliens chasing them.

The humans were weary, and one of them fell to the ground as she walked. Dave’s heart leapt into his throat. The aliens would be on them in no time.

And so they were. But this battle was different than most Dave had witnessed. These humans were armed with fairly decent weapons, and the aliens approaching looked exhausted. They must have had a long day of blowing shit up. He pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of them as they fought.

One of the human girls slashed an alien across the chest, and Dave was surprised again when her knife cut through the uniform. He’d seen that fabric hold up against gunfire. It must have been weakened by something else beforehand, or else her knife was made of titanium or some shit.

The blood that spurted forth was green instead of red, but Dave was rapidly growing accustomed to the unexpected. The aliens had green blood. Big deal, they probably ate rocks, too.

Wait, fuck. There was another one bleeding yellow. They had multicolored blood? That was… actually kind of cool. Dave made a mental note to inform Rose of this development.

Aaand now the group inside the store was coming out. None of them looked remotely injured.

Once they joined the other aliens, the humans stood no chance. Dave looked to the side. He didn’t want to see this. Wait, fuck, now he was just watching some other alien point a gun at a sobbing girl.

That uniform looked awfully familiar…

The grey symbol. The scowl. The tremblings hands as he raised his gun.

This was the same alien that had spared Dave’s life.

But this time, he pulled the trigger.
Dave watched in horror as the alien’s expression closed off. He kicked aside the girl he had just shot, and moved on to the next still-living human. And the next. He blew holes through their heads and chests without seeming to care. His yellow eyes held none of the bitterness Dave had once seen in them. They were empty.

Who had Dave been kidding? These things weren’t human. They were as far from human as they could possibly be.

The blasts from the alien weapons sent beams of light through the air. They glanced harshly against his glasses, and he had to squeeze his eyes shut against the glare. Even without his sight, the noise of falling bodies alone was enough to make him feel sick.

When he opened his eyes again, the alien was staring straight at him.

He had dropped his gun. No humans had been spared in his violent rage, and as the uniformed invader looked around, Dave saw some feeling return to his expression. He looked horrified. He looked guilty.

His mouth opened, and he looked like he was trying to say something. Another of the aliens came to his side, a female. She touched his shoulder lightly, and he collapsed into her arms.

This was too much. Dave was suddenly, painfully aware of the trails of blood slowly seeping towards the car beneath which he hid. It was time to move. From his position, he could see half the aliens clearing out. He dimly recognized them as the team he had originally followed. The remaining group was distracted with the fallen Mr. Pissy Grey Guy.

No, that nickname didn’t really suit him anymore. He was more than that. Dave didn’t know how to describe him, but he was more than alien. Not human, definitely, but… Something similar enough that Dave felt a little bad for him.

It was with the slightest twinge of regret that he wriggled out from underneath the car and made a cautious escape.

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-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] --

TG: hey ive got news

TT: Do tell.

TG: the aliens have rainbow blood

TG: i saw one of them bleeding green and another one yellow

TT: Did you get pictures?

TG: hell yeah i got pictures

-- turntechGodhead [TG] sent tentacleTherapist [TT] the file “greenandyellowx4.jpeg” --

TT: Hmm…

TT: It appears that the colors of the symbols on their uniforms correspond to blood color.

TT: Judging by your other photographs, that means there are ten known blood colors. And all of the
leaders are some shade of purple or blue...

TG: damn no wonder youre the information one

TG: all i got out of that was woah hey pretty colors

TT: I make deductions because it is my job. I would be having much more fun out there in the field with you.

TG: you know thats not true for a second

TG: you love this sociological analysis bullshit

TT: Looks like I’m not the only one good at making deductions.

TT: But soon enough, I will have to learn to love the field as well. I’m almost to San Antonio.

TG: good

TG: i need somebody to watch my back this shit is insane

TG: i had to hide in a car and pray for my life last night in order to get a few hours of sleep

TG: also uh

TG: speaking of praying for my life

TG: eb told you about how i got away from the aliens in austin right

TT: Yes. He said that your life had been spared on a stroke of luck, once one of the aliens had finished cussing you out.

TG: yes thats exactly what happened

TG: i waited until nighttime before leaving that store so i didnt keep track of where the thing went

TG: and then i came here slept and woke up to take pictures

TG: but it turns out that the alien came here too

TT: I’m listening.

TG: long story short he showed up to kick some human ass and ended up shooting the shit out of everything in range

TG: it was weird though

TG: he looked

TG: i dunno

TG: guilty afterwards

TG: and then he fainted or some shit

TT: Interesting. You’re sure that it was the same one who spared you?
TG: yeah hes got a grey symbol thats how i recognized him

TT: A grey one? That’s new. I haven’t seen a single one in grey. Let me make a correction; there are now eleven known blood colors.

TG: and so the wheels in her mind begin turning

TG: what does it mean o wise oracle

TT: Frankly, I’ve got no idea. I’ll keep thinking on it. It’s very intriguing... Most of the species seem heartless, but this one spared you, then went on to faint after killing. The unique symbol must connect somehow.

TG: yeah you do your thing

TG: that actually just happened a few minutes ago and im still on edge from all the blood so

TG: how far away are you

TT: Not far at all. I’m just coming to the city limits.

TT: And now I’m parking the car. I believe I’m on the Northeast end of the city, are you anywhere nearby?

TG: i dont know shit about directions but i think thats probably where i am

TG: stay put ill try and find you

TT: I would give you something to find me by, such as a flag, but I don’t want to be noticed by anyone else. I can already see some aliens running around in the distance.

TT: Look for a blue Sedan with an orange license plate and a sizeable crack in the windshield.

TG: im on it

TG: see you soon

-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] --

Dave twirled his katana idly as he walked. Having someone else to talk to would be nice. If he hadn’t been in contact with John and Rose, he would’ve joined one of the groups of humans hiding out in the city… it was a good thing they had advised him against it. If he had joined one of the groups, he would’ve ended up fighting, and then died in the most unceremonious fashion possible. He was better off with John and Rose.

Oh, and the other one, GG. He supposed he should probably talk to her soon. But now he was preoccupied with finding Rose, and with thinking about how nice it would be to finally not be on his own--

Something crashed into him from the side, but he wasn’t knocked over. His fighting senses were instantly kicked into high gear. Dave had been raised on ambushes, one like this wouldn’t bring him down. He swung his sword threateningly at the snarling alien that faced him.

Dave’s first impression of the invaders had been of terrifying beasts. Then he met the grey one, and realized how like and unlike they were to humans. This one, for example. She was part of a group, it was clear from her uniform and standard-issue weapon. But her appearance was unique.
She had smaller, more rounded horns than what seemed typical. Her skin was dusted with freckles. Most of her teeth were of human size, but two stuck out, making her look like a saber-toothed tiger. Underneath her helmet, Dave thought he could see some sort of hat. Did they have beanies on other planets?

She left her gun in the loop at her belt, instead raising her hands and flipping out a set of Wolverine-esque claws.

A killing machine, a soldier, yes. A hive mind? No. These aliens were individuals, just standardized ones.

Her militarized appearance was plenty intimidating, but the fact remained that she was nearly two feet shorter than Dave.

She lunged forward, only to be knocked back by Dave’s outstretched foot. She glared at him and slashed at his arm with her claws. He smirked and parried with his sword.

“Nice try, kid, but you’re up against a Strider.” Dave aimed a punch towards her face, and she blocked, so he adjusted his aim to knock her helmet clean off.

Her grey skin went pale as she blocked his blows to her now-defenseless head and neck. She was indeed wearing a beanie, he could now see, and there was some sort of cat face embroidered into it. Jesus, how old was she? Aliens wouldn’t draft their kids, would they?

He didn’t have time to think about morality. He had to knock this thing out at the very least before it killed him… Ha.

Dave was sword fighting for his life an alien cat girl. When had his life become an anime?

His sword found its mark, and a small cut opened in the girl’s cheek. A line of green appeared, matching the olive symbol on her chest. Rose had been right about the correspondence, apparently.

The alien girl growled, her set of sharp teeth bared, but Dave could see the fear that guided her. She just wanted to stay alive. Maybe she really was just a kid, forced into a war that was not hers to fight.

Maybe Dave was being stupid...

But one of their kind had spared him, so he would return the favor. He shoved the girl back so her head hit the pavement, and she was out like a light. Her fangs seemed a little less scary once she was unconscious. Just like a cat, sleeping in the sun.

Dave was about to step over her body and move on when a thought occurred to him.

He’d seen the aliens’ armor deflect bullets, stave off knives, and endure the jab of an angry gardener’s pitchfork. It was true that it wasn’t invincible; but it was sure as hell better than his flimsy t-shirt. It had to have some kind of advanced scientific properties. Rose and GG would probably love it.

Dave grabbed the helmet that had fallen from the girl’s head. He knew it would be best to take all her armor, but he just felt plain weird undressing an unconscious girl, no matter her species. He pulled the helmet down over his head and flipped down the attached visor.

Huh. The band of plasticky-looking material was like an amplified pair of sunglasses. He could barely see out of them, they were so dark. He took the helmet off. Futuristic alien shade-visors were cool and all, but he thought he’d stick to his own retro pair of glasses.
He tucked the helmet under his arm and jogged down the road, leaving the unconscious girl lying on the sidewalk. This girl couldn’t have been acting alone. All the aliens Dave had seen had been traveling in packs, so there had to be more nearby, and he didn’t want to run into them.

After a while of running, he could see the edge of the city. It was beginning to grow dark again, and the desert was an endless wasteland, the sand grey in the dying light. Rose had to be somewhere close. He began to pay more attention to the passing cars. There were quite a few blue ones, and quite a few with cracked windshields, but none of them were right.

Then, he saw it.

A blue Sedan with a cracked window and an orange license plate. A New York license plate, Dave could see as he drew closer. It was everything Rose had described and alluded.

Sitting in the driver’s seat was a girl. But unlike many he had seen sitting in the driver’s seats of wrecked cars, this girl was clearly breathing. She smiled as he walked up, and opened the car door.

“Mr. Strider, I assume?” she greeted him. He nodded.

“Do I have to do the acronym thing, or can I use your name now?”

She rolled her eyes. They were violet, Dave noticed, a shade just as curious as his own scarlet. “No. When speaking aloud, names work as well as anything.”

He extended his hand. “Well, then, hey. You’re Rose.”

“Yes, I am.” She shook his hand. “And you are Dave.”

“Yeah.” He took a moment to take in the sight of her face. Having only communicated with the girl over text, it was an interesting experience.

Rose was blonde, her short hair tucked back with a neat black headband. Her lips were painted with the same dark hue. Her expression was cool as she allowed him to look her over, and in her demeanor, it was easy to see the distinguished girl he had texted.

She broke the silence. “The human population here is decreasing rapidly, and the ship will probably be moving on to the next city soon. We should follow. It’ll get us a little closer to John and Jade, so we can meet up with them sooner.”

“Jade,” Dave said with a nod. “That’s GG’s name?”

“Yes.” Rose walked around the side of the car and got into the passenger’s seat. “You’re driving this time. I’m exhausted.”

Dave didn’t have any objections. It would be safer to sleep once the group as all together, he could afford to wait. He got in the car and started it, shoving the alien helmet he had stolen into the back seat. With a turn of the steering wheel, he backed the car up and turned it away from the city.

“What’s that?” Rose said curiously, looking into the back seat.

“Alien helmet,” Dave said casually. “Want a look?”

“Absolutely.” Rose reached back to retrieve it and turned it over in her hands, her eyes gleaming. “How very interesting. I couldn’t tell you what material this is made of…” She slipped the helmet on.

“The visor works kinda like a pair of shades,” Dave said helpfully.
“I can see that. I wonder, does that mean our sun is too bright for them?” Rose mused. “I’ll have to do some experimenting once the sun comes up again.” She pressed a button on the side of the helmet. “Oh! Oh, wow.”

“What is it?” Dave asked.

“This is a computer screen.” Rose tapped on the visor. “Can you see it from the outside?”

“Nope. Just looks like plastic to me.”

“I highly doubt that it is plastic. I wonder how much you can do with this? I’ll have to get Jade on it as soon as we meet up. I’m more of an analyzer than a practical scientist.” She took the helmet off and examined it closely.

Dave glanced at it. “Wait, what’s that?” He ran his fingers along a hot pink design, almost like a logo, that was printed on the back of the helmet. It was the same design that adorned the sides of the battleship.

“It obviously has some significance. Maybe it’s like a flag?” Rose suggested. She pulled out her cell phone, and Dave saw her open Pesterchum. Whoever she was talking to had their text set to a bright shade of green.

She stifled a yawn as she typed. “Dave, I know this might be awkward for you, but would you mind if I went to sleep? It’s been a very long few days for me, and I need the rest.”

“Nah, it’s cool. I like the quiet. ‘S not awkward.” Dave maneuvered the car around a fallen building. They were outside the city in no time at all.

If he looked out the window, he could see the ship beginning to move on. He didn’t want to think about what that meant for all the American soldiers who had showed up to defend the civilians. “Looks like the ship’s heading for Kerrville,” he murmured, half to himself.

He looked to Rose. “We’ve got about an hour’s drive. Probably more, if the ship decides to move on to a bigger city.”

Rose’s eyes were closed. She made a small noise of affirmation. “Wake me when we’re there. We’ll have to wait a while for John and Jade to show up, but afterwards, we can all get the sleep we so desperately crave.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Dave didn’t know Rose very well, so there should have been quite a lot of awkwardness in the air between them. He was surprised to find that there was none. Maybe it was the apocalypse, bringing people together because they needed to be. Maybe they just had personalities that worked well together. Whatever it was, he felt comfortable with the girl, and he felt that they could be good friends. The sound of her quiet breathing as she drifted off to sleep was a welcome noise.

Usually, Dave would fill some of the silence of the open road with music, but he didn’t want to be rude when Rose was trying to sleep. He was left with only his thoughts.

They were mostly about that grey alien.

It was really fucking annoying that he didn’t know the guy’s name. Dave kept having to resort to nicknames, capitalizing on the small aspects of his personality he had witnessed. Or, even worse, capitalizing on his species alone, and calling him “the alien.” That wasn’t even his species! It was
just a label.

Dave wondered what their species was called.

He wondered what had happened to nubby-horns after he had collapsed. Some weird, stockholmsyndrome-afflicted part of him was kind of hoping the alien was okay. He shouldn’t be sympathizing with something that wanted to destroy his planet, but he was only human, and after seeing the look of horror in those yellow eyes as they witnessed their own actions… He couldn’t help but feel pity.

Of course he couldn’t wish for the alien to live long and prosper. That would just end up with more humans being killed. But he at least hoped the guy was doing okay.

Dave’s thoughts continued in this confusing, morally grey manner as he drove. All he had to do was follow the ship as it flew. It moved parallel to the ground, a constant presence and guide hovering in the corner of his vision. Completely ignoring the legal speed limit, he managed to arrive even before it did.

He shook Rose’s shoulder gently. “Hey. Wake up.”

She groaned quietly. “I suppose I must.”

“Yep. Time to meet your friends.”

Rose opened her eyes and stretched. “They’re your friends too. To quote one of the most influential films of our time, ‘we’re all in this together.'”

It took everything in him to keep Dave from bursting into song. He was overtired and giddy at the fact that he was alive, and goddamn it, High School Musical was his shit. He resorted to humming as Rose pulled out her phone and began typing away.

“All right,” she said finally. “We need to get to the Northwest end of the city. They’ll be driving around in a white Honda.”

Dave snorted. “Wait a minute. Where do they live?”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “Humor me,” he said.

“John lives in Seattle. I already told you that Jade’s been staying with him, but she’s natively from Hawaii. Why?”

“The invasion hasn’t hit the West coast yet,” Dave said. “Did they literally steal a car?”

Rose shook her head. “It was John’s father’s.”

The smile was wiped from Dave’s face. “Shit. Sorry. Where’d he go, if the invasion hasn’t started there yet?”

“We don’t know. It was very unlike him to disappear when he was needed.” Rose sighed. “What about your family? You said your only relative vanished?”

Dave looked away. He didn’t want to think about Bro. “Yeah, he vanished,” he said quietly. “But it wasn’t really unlike him.”

Rose didn’t ask any further questions, and Dave was incredibly grateful. He tried to appear as thankful as he could as he followed her directions around the city. He wound through the side streets and main roads, blessing the lack of rubble; the city had already been evacuated, so it was free of
pedestrians, and without fallen buildings to inhibit the car, the going was easy.

The first movement they saw was another car. A white Honda, to be precise, slowly pulling closer until the two vehicles were just feet apart. Rose’s exhaustion seemed to evaporate as she tumbled out the door.

The white car’s doors flew open, and a girl and boy with identical scruffy black hair rushed out to meet Rose. The three piled into a hug. Dave drummed his hands against the steering wheel as he watched them exclaim with delight. He hadn’t felt awkward and Rose alone, but this, this felt weird.

The boy went over and pulled the door open. His blue eyes sparkled as he grinned and practically shouted, “Hi Dave!”

“John,” the nearly-identical girl chided. “Give him some space. I bet he’s really tired!” She joined her, what had Rose said they were? Cousins? She joined her cousin in front of Dave and smiled. “Hi! My name’s Jade. I guess we’re all a team now, huh?”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Good to meet you.”

He didn’t know why he was feeling so strange. This was all just so sudden… The world was ending, he’d watched tens of people die mere hours ago, and now he had jumped in with this group of crazy teens just because they were there.

And on top of all that, everyone in the group wanted to be his friend. He really wasn’t used to that.

Jade’s smile faded a bit as she watched him. “Dave, are you tired? I think we should all get to sleep soon. Me and John got to take turns driving, but you and Rose have probably been awake for ages.”

Rose nodded. “Yes, we have. How about this: we can take care of introductions tomorrow morning, and go over any invasion-related plans. Now, we can just chat a little, if we want, and go to sleep.”

The idea of sleep sounded particularly inviting.

John nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah. Do you want to come in our car? It’s a lot bigger.”

Dave looked at his beaming face, coupled with that of his cousin and Rose.

“I think I’ll stay in here,” he mumbled. “I’ll probably fall asleep real quick, y’know. I’ll see you guys in the morning… Yell if anything happens.”

John’s face fell, but he did not object. “Well… All right. You’re welcome to come in if you change your mind! Good night, Dave.” He waved playfully as he shut the door. Dave leaned back in his chair and tried to ignore the odd feeling in his gut as the others piled into the other car, talking in hushed voices.

In time, their voices died out, and the silence of the car around him was soothing. He breathed deeply. These people may be all gung-ho about friendship and fighting aliens, but that was okay. Dave would get used to it. The awkwardness would fade, he was sure.

John seemed nice, based on the times they had talked over text. A dork, yes, but nice. Dave had never spoken to Jade. She seemed nice too, and he had already gotten to know Rose a bit. They would all be good friends to have. Having friends… it would be a nice change.

Dave was probably going to die on this ridiculous mission, but if he did, it would be nice to have someone by his side.
Just to clarify, Dave has PTSD and anxiety. Hope y'all enjoy angst.
Driving Me Crazy

Chapter Summary

"I can feel it, being torn from my, my hands; my innocence
This change is all so permanent
Can't you see a change in me?
I said, it's all so permanent!"

-Demon Limbs, PVRIS

The Imperial ship began to shift in its position mere hours after Karkat’s little breakdown. When he caught sight of the scarlet behemoth’s movement, he pointed it out to his team members. The ship was moving slowly, much slower than it would in deep space, and Karkat thought it must be restraining itself so all the ground soldiers could follow it. Even with slowed movement, it was difficult to keep up with.

Trolls were a proud species. Karkat saw squad after squad pile out of human vehicles once they reached the edge of the city, leaving their perfectly good transportation behind in favor of walking. They probably thought it would be shameful to be seen using such an inferior piece of technology. At first, Karkat laughed at their foolishness, enjoying the sight of them running along even as they grew fatigued. Then Eridan ordered they follow suit, and he was suddenly regretting everything.

“Character building,” he called it. Karkat called it hoofbeast shit.

Outside the city, the scope of the Alternian army was clear. There must have been thousands of trolls scurrying through the desert in an effort to keep close to the ship. But, at the same time, it seemed like there were much fewer than had gathered prior to docking. Karkat frowned. Had they actually lost some numbers in the fight against humanity?

As he traveled, his friends by his side, time began to blur. It was so difficult to keep track of the days and nights now. Karkat’s sleep schedule had been completely thrown off, and without sopor, it was even worse. He thought he fell asleep at one point, collapsing to the ground as he ran. But then he woke up somehow on his feet again, running, running. He was beyond sleep. He was a warrior. He was Alternian, and he was strong.

The only thing that held him back was the reminder of everything that made him weak.

Dave. Dave. Dave. The name repeated in the back of his pan, echoing like a chant through the halls of a heretic’s church. It sent him running with renewed fervor every time his fatigue threatened to overcome him.

These were not caliginous feelings. Black romance started as little inklings of dislike, not full-blown antipathy, even the dumbest wiggler would know that. And besides, having a crush on a member of a different fucking species would be disgusting. Karkat would never sink that low. No, he would not allow that to happen. This was something different.

But it wasn’t nothing. It was so much more than nothing.
Once they reached the next city, Karkat fell to his frondjoints. He may have been a strong warrior, but goddamn, he needed to rest.

He felt vulnerable in front of the legion of trolls surrounding him, so he pulled Kanaya to his side and whispered: “We should find somewhere to get some sleep.” She nodded and passed the message along to Eridan.

“I don’t wanna do it here, not with all these people around,” Eridan said. Apparently Karkat was not the only one intimidated. “Let’s find some buildin’ to sleep in, okay?”

“Sure,” Karkat said warily. “My nubs hurt like fuck. Anywhere I can lie down is good enough for me.”

“I can carry you, if you like,” Kanaya offered. Karkat almost blushed, then remembered the crowd. The red tint of his cheeks would be a dead giveaway. He hastily thought of other things.

“I know you’re strong enough to do it, but I think I’ll pass,” he said. He couldn’t stand the smug looks his friends would give if they saw him getting all romantic. But he did take Kanaya’s prong in his, because he wasn’t a neglectful asshole. He made a mental note to give Kanaya plenty of paps as they went to sleep.

Eridan guided his team through the closest doorway, and they went inside to find a clothing store of some kind. Oddly enough, all the clothes were different, and none of them had symbols on them. Karkat had noticed varied styles adorning the human corpses he encountered, and had chalked it up to more alien weirdness. But no symbols? What was this society?

Whatever. The clothes would be good enough to sleep on, seeing as there were no recuperacoons in sight. He ripped several of the softest items from their hangers and arranged them into a makeshift pile.

The second he fell into it, Kanaya curled by his side, he blacked out.

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Karkat’s dreams were troubled, filled with visions of red, douches in sunglasses, and explosions shattering his nugbone. Flames licked at his glance nuggets, and he woke with a gasp. The noise of explosions did not cease as his breathing slowed to something more regular.

A low rumble in the background, they were almost a comforting sound, like rain on a hive roof. Karkat yawned, smiling softly at the still-sleeping Kanaya beside him. He reached out to touch her, to stroke her hair, perhaps, when a sudden voice made him jump out of his skin.

“Hi, Karkitty!”

“Fucking hell!” he yelped, leaping back and clutching his chest. Nepeta sat on the other side of the room, giggling. She was curled up in a pile of clothes and looked as if she had been there for quite some time.

“How the fuck did you get here?” Karkat asked, astonished. “Where’s your leader?”

Nepeta frowned. “We got separated. I, um,” she blushed olive, “I tried to fight a human by myself, and I got my ass handed to me. When I woke up, my team had left without me.”

“Damn. That sucks.” Karkat was genuinely sorry to hear of her misfortune. Things had been awkward between them in their early teenage sweeps, due to Nepeta’s unrequited red feelings, but
they had talked a lot more since then, and she was someone Karkat called a friend.

“Not really! My leader was kind of rude.” Nepeta’s cartilaginous nub wrinkled. “Actually, more than a little. She was mean. I’m glad that I got away from her, because…” Her expression brightened. “I found Equius and Aradia here!”

“Really? How?” This city was smaller than the previous one had been, so the army of trolls was more concentrated. The lack of space made it so there were more trolls packed close together, so Karkat supposed it would be possible to locate someone if you looked hard. But it would still be difficult.

“Equius was easy to find, considering he’s out there breaking down buildings with his lightest touch,” Nepeta said cheerily. “And Aradia’s on his team. You’re so lucky that you got in with all people you know!”

Karkat scowled. “It’s lucky for you that I did. Did you think this little visit through at all? What if I was on a team with someone who didn’t condone rule-breaking?”

“Technically, it’s not against the rules to break away from your group,” Nepeta reminded him. “It isn’t written anywhere that you can’t. Otherwise they wouldn’t have left me!”

“You know what I meant. How did you even find me?”

“Luck! I came in here looking for supplies, and instead, I found you.”

“Looking for thupplieth? Doeth that mean human food’th actually edible?” Karkat jumped. He hadn’t realized Sollux was awake.

Nepeta shrugged. “It’s edible. Doesn’t taste so good, but you can eat it if you need.”

“What are we talking about?” Kanaya murmured. “Is that Nepeta I hear?” Her glance nuggets blinked open, and she sat up. “Oh! Hello.”

“Oh, it looks like we’re all getting up!” Nepeta smiled. “I guess I’d better finish the job, then.” She hopped over to the pile which contained a sprawled out-Terezi and tapped her. “AC bids the mighty dragoness a good evening, and tells her that is it time to awake, for there is a job to be done!”

Terezi inhaled loudly through her nose. “GC wonders if that could possibly be her friend and frequent RP partner, the lioness?”

“The one and only!”

Terezi sat up groggily. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I’ll repeat myself once everyone is up.”

Nepeta went over to tap Vriska and Eridan. Terezi sighed with relief as the former was jerked awake. “Thanks. I don’t think I could stand her snoring any longer.”

“Hey!” Vriska shoved her, albeit more weakly than usual. She rubbed the sleep from her glance nuggets and squinted at Nepeta.

“Get talking. Why are you here?”

“Shh.” Nepeta waited for Eridan to sit up, then began. “I got separated from my group, blah blah, so I was running around and I found Equius and Aradia. Then I went in here looking for supplies, and I
found you guys! We’re only missing Tavros, Feferi, and Gamzee, so… I figured we should try to find them.”

“We can’t get to Fef,” Eridan said, his voice a bit hoarse from sleep. “She stayed on the ship, ‘cause a’ her blood and all.”

Nepeta frowned. “Aww, well that stinks! I was hoping we could have a big reunion-type thing. I guess it’ll still be a big enough party with the eleven of us, but it’d be better if she could come.”

Vriska snorted. “That’s assuming we can find Tavros and Gamzee. It was a stroke of luck that you managed to locate your sweatstain of a moirail, and us, for that matter, but how the fuck are we supposed to find the others?”

Nepeta pursed her lips. “Hmm… We could text them?”

“Nah,” Eridan said gloomily. “I tried to text Fef the first night we left. Our Trollian’s restricted so we can’t text anyone outside our own teams.”

Nepeta’s face fell, but Vriska’s remained impassive. “Look, is it reeeeeeeally that big a deal if we don’t find them? What’s a juggalo and a paraplegic in the long run?”

Karkat laughed, but it did not reach his glance nuggets. It was a dry, fake sound. “Oh. Wow, Vriska, you’re so funny. And by funny I mean deformed. I know you don’t care about anyone but yourself, but Gamzee is my fucking friend, and if there’s a chance we can find him and Tavros, we will.”

“Yeah,” Sollux spoke up. “I mean, I managed to hack Karkat into our group. Who’th to thay I can’t hack the firewall around Trollian?”

The mood in the room lightened considerably at that. Even Vriska kept her comments to herself.

“Well, I think that sounds like a good plan!” said Nepeta. “Should we, um, get started now?”

Eridan shrugged. “I mean, there are plenty of other squadrons to fight the war, and I doubt the fuckin’ Condesce will notice if one group isn’t on task. So… Let’s get to it.”

Sollux pulled out his palmhusk, sighing deeply as he began to type. “Thith ith going to take forever on a palmhuthk,” he muttered. “Don’t expect me to take two dayth. Thith could take weekth.”

“But it’s worth it, right?” Karkat asked.

“Of courthe it’th fucking worth it,” Sollux snapped back. “It’th FF.”

“And Equius, Tavros, and Gamzee!” Nepeta added.

“Right. Them too.”

Sollux continued typing away, oblivious to the growing silence. The clacking of his claws was the only sound in the store until Eridan stood up.

“Well, it seems like we might be here a while. I’m gonna go gather any more supplies there are to be had. Anyone want to come with?”

Karkat pushed himself up. “I’ll come. I can’t keep sitting around like this, I need something to do.”

He glanced back and forth as he opened the door, checking to see how populated the road was. The crowd of trolls had mostly dispersed, so he felt no apprehension as he went outside. A few
lowbloods milled about, picking through the wreckage and ducking for cover as explosions shook the ground, but they were harmless. The real fight had moved to another part of the city.

This place was different in the lack of alien corpses strewn about; they must have had the sense to get out before their city was to be razed. Karkat was glad of their sudden intelligence. All the gore had been quite off-putting.

Not to say that he had moral reservations or anything. He scowled as he remembered his conversation with Kanaya. He could be upset by gore without having morals, no matter what she said. He could balk at the idea of killing without any stupid morals… He could. He could!

This train of thought was making him angry. Karkat tried to think of other things, filling his pan with delightful images of human in pain. Alive, of course, just in pain.

They were mostly of Dave.

Damn it, he needed to think of something else!

He walked down the street with Eridan, looking for any storefronts that held promise. No luck. Karkat resorted to staring at his own reflection in abandoned vehicle windows as he walked.

The sight of his own face couldn’t lie. It insisted that he was Alternian, and the existence of his fangs and horns (though nubby) proved it correct.

But was he a real troll, if he couldn’t even kill?

God damn it, there he went again. Karkat told himself to stop looking in the windows. It would just make him look vain and… Holy shit, wait, what?

Karkat stopped walking.

Maybe it was a trick of the light?

He leaned in closer to the window, scrutinizing his reflection. It couldn’t be. It wouldn’t happen so suddenly.

But the image could not lie, and the red irises staring back at Karkat were nothing but the cold truth.

“Oh, fuck,” he said under his breath. He had been hoping the pigment of his glance nuggets wouldn’t start changing for another sweep. It hadn’t happened to any of the other trolls yet. Why did he always have to get saddled with the bad luck?

This made it all the more critical for him to hide. He hadn’t been thinking much of it since he had arrived on Earth. He thought he had been safe with his group, but the fact remained that if he was cut in front of anyone else, he’d be dead before you could say “mutant.” His friends probably would be, too, for protecting him.

Luckily, Eridan hadn’t noticed. Karkat walked a little faster and hoped no one else would. He kept his glance nuggets trained on the ground. He knew his friends would find out soon, but he wanted to keep it secret as long as he could. It was safer if no one knew. Safer for him, safer for them.

It would be safer for them if they’d never met him, but there was really no way to change that.

Karkat went back to thinking about Dave in pain. It was better than contemplating his imminent culling.
Karkat and Eridan managed to locate a market of some kind. They carried as much food as they
could, some of which they chose based on how edible it looked, some of which based on how
intriguing it looked. They were delighted to find that cotton candy was present on this planet. Truly,
destiny must be real.

They reunited with the others back in the clothing store. Foods were sampled, some rejected and
some enjoyed. Terezi took particular pleasure in devouring a bag of sweets. Once enough had been
consumed, each troll took a package of food to keep as a backup stash.

Karkat didn’t look directly at any of his friends.

After a while, he figured he must look pretty suspicious. So, he excused himself from the store,
claiming sickness from the “human shitproducts.” Only Kanaya tried to follow, but he shooed her
away. He needed to be alone.

All the trolls who had been outside had left by now. It was mid-day, and even with his helmet on,
Karkat had to squint as he walked around. He didn’t know where exactly he was going. He just
needed to blow off some steam, hide himself away until he got a grip.

Solitude seemed to do the trick. Karkat pushed away all the dark thoughts, all the worries. He
breathed deeply as he passed through the waste of what once had been a thriving center of human
life.

The same sense of weird appreciation Karkat had felt when he saw Earth for the first time was hitting
him again. The human race was fucked up. It was weird, it was a cosmic mistake, but at the same
time, it was undeniably beautiful.

It was only idle appreciation, it wasn’t as if he was going to start loving humans. That made it okay,
right? Maybe it was okay to recognize the good qualities in something you were meant to detest.

Just as Karkat was coming to this conclusion, he saw it.

It was a group of humans. It was two females and two males, toting weapons and laughing. It was
too far away to see clearly, but even from a distance, Karkat recognized those sunglasses. Dave. It
had to be.

That motherfucker, this had all started with him, hadn’t it?

The acceptance that had been worming its way into Karkat’s pump biscuit was abruptly expelled. He
shouldn’t be acknowledging any good qualities of this putrid planet, what was wrong with him?
What had Dave done? Ever since Karkat had laid eyes on the ugly human, his senses had been off.
He had all these confusing feelings of individuality, of compassion and fear and self-loathing. It was
all Dave’s fault.

When the ship had landed, Eridan had ordered everyone to stick together. Well. Desperate times
called for desperate measures.

Karkat slunk to the side of the road. He didn’t think the humans had seen him yet, and he wanted to
keep it that way. He didn’t really know what he was planning to do… He just knew that he had to
speak to Dave again.

No, he wanted to hurt Dave again.
The humans drew closer, chattering amongst themselves as if they hadn’t a care in the world. Didn’t they realize that their city was teeming with hostile life forms? Didn’t they know that they’d be killed if they were seen? That is, they’d be killed if they were seen by anyone but him.

Karkat scowled. He could afford to leave them alive, but only because he had unfinished business with one of them. He’d kill them eventually. Just not now.

Once they were close enough, he could see that two of them wore glasses, and they each had symbols on their shirts. What, so humans did have symbols? But he hadn’t seen any others with them… Maybe only the young ones had them? Karkat thought that would make sense. More sense than no symbols at all. After all, the only people he’d ever heard of as having no sign were mutants. He himself had gotten lucky…

A chill went down his posture pole. Of course. Why hadn’t he thought of it before?

Humans all had mutant blood. Of course they would all be signless.

He began to assemble a plan. The group of humans was rapidly drawing near. Once they were within range, he would attack. The three strangers would be incapacitated, and he and Dave would be left alone. Then Karkat could give him the ass-kicking he needed, and ask him a question. What have you done to me?

“Karkat?”

Kanaya’s voice was distant, calling his name somewhere a few blocks away. Karkat cursed under his breath. He wouldn’t be able to talk to Dave with her around. It would just be awkward. They’d have to have a feelings jam about it, and within that time the humans could get away.

Karkat drew back, his glance nuggets narrowed. Today would not be the day, then. But the time would come soon. Karkat and Dave would be reunited, and their combined presence would be a collision of fire and ice, clashing and burning with the fury of an Alternian wronged.

Karkat weaved his way through the shadows until the humans were out of sight. Kanaya stood in the middle of the street, turning in a circle and looking around with a confused expression. Her glance nuggets landed on him, and she smiled.

“Oh, there you are. Where ever did you go? I was beginning to worry.”

He sighed. She wouldn’t accept any lie he could make up, but he didn’t want to tell the whole truth. Instead, he opted for a lie of omission. No word of Dave would escape his squawk gaper.

“My pigmentation’s starting to turn,” Karkat muttered. He pointed to his glance nuggets.

“Show me,” she said gently.

Karkat lifted his gaze to look at Kanaya directly, his scarlet-tinged irises in plain sight. She reached out to pat his cheek. “Do not trouble yourself over the matter. We will not allow you to be discovered.”

“That might be hard,” he argued. “I mean, there are tons of trolls around, and the humans are starting to fight back more. Somebody’s bound to see me bleed sooner or later.”

“No,” Kanaya’s voice remained firm. “Nothing is going to happen to you, I will not allow it. Come back with me to our temporary residence?”
Karkat consented to be led away, Kanaya’s arm wrapped around him. “It is true that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe, but it is also true that you will be at higher risk now that your blood color is immediately visible,” she continued. “So you should avoid taking walks alone like this.”

“Right. No more privacy for me,” Karkat grumbled.

“You can still have privacy, but please remain close enough to someone that they can help you if necessary.” Kanaya opened the door and guided Karkat back inside. “For your own safety.”

He sighed. There went his chance to talk to Dave again.

“ Took you fuckerth long enough,” Sollux mumbled. He spoke slowly, still absorbed in his coding. He looked as if he hadn’t moved an inch since Karkat had last seen him. His gaze flickered up for a brief moment, and he froze.

“Yeah,” Karkat said. He looked away, wishing no one would notice the change in his appearance. Whenever his mutation was acknowledged, there was an uncomfortable prickling sensation in the back of his pan. Why did people have to realize that he was different? Even if they were being supportive, it was stressful. There was always danger.

Karkat supposed that discomfort would be constant now.

He settled into his pile of clothes and flopped back, staring up at the ceiling. Today had been a long day. (Considering he was a member of a nocturnal species, the feeling was only worse. Why did humans have to be diurnal? His sleep schedule had almost completely flipped, and it still felt wrong every time he stepped out in the sunlight).

“This is gonna get boring real fuckin’ fast,” said Eridan. “Just sitting around while tech-head stares at his palmhusk? I say we should divide into two groups. Some people stay here with Sol, and the others go out search for Tavros and Gamzee out in the city.”

Karkat lept up. Long day? What long day? He was perfectly energized. “I’ll go.”

Kanaya shot him a disapproving look, but he didn’t care. He’d have friends around to protect him. In his excitement, the danger of violent trolls was forgotten, or rather, ignored. Karkat was going to find Dave. And once he had talked to the human, maimed it, and received an explanation for his shortcomings…

Karkat still didn’t want to think about the inevitable killing that would follow. He’d cross that crossing trestle when he came to it. For now, he was content to know that soon, his mistakes would be rectified. Everything would go back to normal.

And he would breathe easy once more.
Ready, Aim, Fire

Chapter Summary

"Here we are, don't turn away now
We are the warriors that built this town"

-Warriors, Imagine Dragons

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“If we’re going to be the leaders of a rebellion, we need a name!”

Dave marveled at how this Jade girl could be so energized after waking up. The second she and her cousin had piled out of their car, they had been in Dave’s, shaking him awake. At least Rose had the decency to look tired.

Jade had insisted on taking a trip around the city once everyone was coherent. Dave was less than enthusiastic about the idea, but once he began walking around, he relaxed. Having people to talk to was actually pretty nice, when he ignored the weirdness of it.

“Nobody will take us seriously if we don’t have a name,” Jade continued. “So I say we should brainstorm.”

“Do we need to be taken seriously? It’s not as if aliens would understand any name we might give ourselves,” Rose pointed out.

Jade shushed her. “It’s about morale too! Does anyone have any ideas?”

“Alien-busters!” John said.

“No. Don’t you dare bring your Ghostbusters obsession into this. Dave?”

“Ripley’s Revenge,” Dave said with a straight face. John gasped in almost comical fashion.

“You’ve seen Alien?”

“Dude, who the fuck hasn’t seen Alien?”

“Matters of cinema aside, I do not see why we need a title,” Rose interrupted. “If we must call ourselves something, why not just keep it simple? The Resistance. It works as well as anything.”

Dave shrugged. “Sure. ‘S all the same to me.”

Ignoring the pouty looks from John and Jade, Rose continued. “We should work out some sort of plan. If we are to be a resistance, we must not let apathy take hold. We must resist.”

Dave swung his sword aimlessly. “Yeah. Let’s go blow up some aliens, or whatever. How exactly are we going to do that with no weapons beyond a shitty katana, knitting needles, a hammer, and a gun?”
Jade rolled her eyes. “We don’t need to blow anything up. Those weapons are good enough to fight with!”

“Yeah… But they aren’t good enough to kill with. I mean, not on a large scale.” Dave pursed his lips. “I guess that makes sense, though, considering it’s you. You really don’t seem like the killing-aliens type.”

“Well…” Jade hesitated. “Is anyone, really? I don’t want to kill anything. But I’ll do whatever I have to in order to help humanity survive.”

Dave didn’t think he’d have a problem with killing the invaders, but he did not voice his disagreement.

“I think we should increase our numbers before we go charging into battle,” said Rose. “This city was evacuated, but I highly doubt that everyone is gone. The apocalypse breeds fools. There will be at least a few reckless individuals who will join our cause, if we can simply locate them.”

John raised his hammer high into the air. “Then, we have a mission! Find the humans!”

“It may not be easy,” Rose warned. “This will take a lot of tedious searching.”

Jade patted her on the shoulder. “We know, Rose. It might take a really long time. But I’m sure we can do it!”

Dave wished he felt so certain.

***

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Dave groaned. “Can we just go fight aliens by ourselves? Damn, I don’t even care if it’s suicide at this point, I just want to do something other than take the scenic route through abandoned buildings.”

It had been half a day since they had begun searching, and no humans had been found.

“Seriously. If we have to fight, why not just join up with the military? At least they know what they’re doing,” he said.

“No!” Jade said, with a surprising amount of conviction. “That is a very bad idea and we definitely cannot do that.”

“Oh? How come?”

John answered for her. “Well, first of all, the army won’t think like us. They’ll just try to wipe out all the aliens without a second thought! They might try a little bit to understand them, but when they fail, they’ll just resort to violence. Haven’t you ever seen an apocalypse movie? There’s always something the humans are missing.”

Dave remained unimpressed. “You really don’t think that these guys are just here to murder us? You think they’ve got some kind of motive beyond bloodlust?”

“They must,” John said firmly. “Nobody would decimate an entire planet just for fun. Not even aliens.”

“Does motive really matter, though? They’re still killing humans by the thousands.”

“Of course it matters!” said Jade, looking scandalized. “If we find out what they want, we could
reach some sort of compromise!"

Dave sighed. “And you really think we, a bunch of teenagers, are best suited to find that compromise?”

“If nobody else is going to try, then yes. Yes we are.”

People always went on about the power of hope, but in Dave’s opinion, that was bullshit. Believing in something totally impossible was not going to make it happen. In the real world, you just had to face the facts. They could resist all they wanted, but they were still going to die.

Not that he cared. He was still all for fighting back. He was just honest with himself about the outcome, unlike the other members of his new team.

He was opening his mouth to change the subject when he heard the clanging.

Metal on metal, sword on sword. It sent a shiver down his spine. He knew that sound all too well, as well as the hurt that came soon after.

But the voice shouting along was unfamiliar.

“Fuck off! Jesus, you freaks don’t know when to quit!”

Jade’s eyes widened. “There’s what we’ve been looking for. A human!”

She exchanged a look with the other members of her party, and in an instant, they were dashing off towards the source of the sound.

Down the street, a single boy faced off against three aliens. He was tall and blond, and he wielded a katana not unlike Dave’s own. The most remarkable aspect of his battle was the fact that he appeared to be winning. He was a skilled fighter, and though the aliens were resilient, he slowly beat them back.

“Taste the rainbow, bitch!”

He sliced his sword in a wide arc, catching all three aliens in a spurt of multicolored blood. They each staggered, and he backed away to take a breath.

“Hey!” John yelled. “Leave some for us!”

The boy turned around, and relief filled his face as he saw the three approaching. One of the aliens behind him propped itself up. The boy, oblivious, waved to Jade and beckoned her closer.

“Watch out, idiot!” Dave shouted. He broke into a sprint and jumped up, the alien’s eyes widening as his foot connected with its face.

When it fell, it stayed down. The boy looked impressed.

“Not bad, kid.”

His voice had a trace of a drawl to it. Dave turned to give a helpful hint about never turning one’s back on the body, when his heart nearly stopped.

This kid was wearing shades exactly like the ones his Bro wore.

“What’s up?” the boy asked, raising an eyebrow. Maybe it wasn’t accurate to call him a boy. He was
clearly older than Dave, maybe somewhere in his early twenties, but it wouldn’t be right to call him a man, either.

Dave shook himself. Anime shades weren’t that uncommon. Why was he getting so freaked?

Maybe it was because he was looking the spitting image of his abuser in the face, a helpful little voice in the back of his mind said. He told it to shut up.

“Nothin’,” Dave replied casually. “Just wondering if you’d want to join a rebellion against these intergalactic douchebags.”

The boy’s eyebrow arched yet further. “Hm. Who else is in it?”

Dave pointed to Rose, John, and Jade.

The boy laughed aloud, and though Dave heartily agreed with the scornful sentiment behind the laugh, he couldn’t help but feel defensive. He had thrown in his lot with these three morons, so that made him a moron, too. And he would just be an asshole if he didn’t stand up for his fellows.

But when he opened his mouth to retort, the boy stuck out his hand. “The name’s Dirk. I’ll go with you guys, if you’re okay having a sarcastic ass around.”

“More than okay. If you’re more sarcastic than any of us, the amount of shock that I’ll have will be greater than if you rubbed your feet on the carpet and touched a doorknob,” Dave answered. He shook Dirk’s hand. “So, uh, welcome, I guess?”

“Hi there!” Jade piped up. “We’re trying to find more people to join us right now, and then we’re going to fight!”

“Good to hear. Fighting’s practically the only thing I’m good at,” said Dirk. Dave felt a pang of sympathy. No, not sympathy. Empathy. What Dirk had said described him perfectly.

“I don’t know how much luck you’re going to have finding more people, though,” Dirk continued. “I’ve been around since the evacuation, and I was surprised to see it, but pretty much everybody cleared out. Anybody who didn’t, they got killed. Except me.”

“Why didn’t you evacuate with the rest?” John asked. “Just out of curiosity.”

Dirk shrugged. “I don’t really have a family, just a group of people I used to crash with. I didn’t have a reason to save myself, so, I figured I’d stick it out here. Might as well do some good before the world ends, that kind of thing.”

“Well, now you’ve got the chance to do even more good,” John said with a smile.

“Yeah.”

There was a bit of an awkward silence, and Dave coughed. “So, if we aren’t going to find any other humans around, should we just fight now?”

“Sounds good to me!” said Jade. She cocked her rifle and grinned.

“Excellent. Now all we must do is find a suitable group of enemies,” said Rose. She surveyed the area. “I believe that the most efficient thing to do would be to let them come to us.” She took Jade’s gun, and, aiming it upwards, fired it into the sky. The bullet shot through the air with a crack that sent ripples of pain through Dave’s skull. That shit was loud. Rose only winced. “Perhaps we should
invest in a pair of noise-canceling headphones?"

“Too late to go shopping,” said Dave. Already, a pack of aliens had appeared down the street. They were running ever closer, and he could see them pulling out those laser guns they carried everywhere. “We’ve got company.”

Jade raised her rifle and aligned the scope with her eye. Before the aliens were fifty feet away, she had poked her tongue out and fired, felling one.

“Nice shot,” Dave commented.

Jade looked sad. “Don’t compliment murder, Dave.” She fired again, and a laser shot back in her direction. She leapt to the side to avoid it.

John’s hammer raised, and Dirk and Dave’s two swords were brandished. Rose held a sharp pair of knitting needles. The aliens drew ever closer, and the humans danced between volleys of light in a deadly ballet.

Dave had previously laughed at Rose’s weapon of choice. When he saw her leap forth and plunge the needles into the eyes of an aggressor, he mentally retracted the laugh. He also made a note to never wind up on Rose’s bad side.

He then chose an alien to take on. The two faced off, walking in a wary circle, each daring the other to make the first move. Dave feinted right then jabbed left, but his opponent saw it coming. The alien knocked him upside the head with the butt of its blaster. Dave shook off the pain, then got in close to hack at the thing’s armor.

Occupied with defending itself from his barrage of strikes, it could not shoot him. Dave worked steadily away at the armor until he felt a small difference in pressure. The fabric was beginning to weaken.

The alien snarled and backed away. It fired, but the beam of hot light did not meet its mark. It sizzled against the pavement where Dave had stood a moment before. Now, he was in the air, twisting, kicking, and the alien’s gun fell to the ground.

It cried out as his blade sank through the weakened armor. One cut, not long, but deep enough to kill. Turquoise blood rose to the surface. Dave pulled his sword out from the alien’s chest and wiped the blood off, already glancing around for the next opponent.

Rose had killed one, the corpse filled with small holes that leaked violet. Jade had shot down two. One other appeared to have a broken nose, and it dropped as John’s hammer connected with its head. There was one left.

It was facing off against Dirk, holding a sword instead of the customary blaster. Dave recalled the girl with the Wolverine claws. Each alien had a gun, but they also had a personal weapon, apparently. He’d have to remember that.

The alien and Dirk clashed, the two swords ringing out as they collided. Dave gritted his teeth.

_Runrunrunmovehe’llkillyou._

Metal scraped along metal, and the alien’s blade wobbled.

_Hewon’tstopwhenyoubled._
Dave’s fingers trembled.

**Beaherobeaherowhy can’t you be what he wants?**

Dave turned away. The familiar sound of a sword cutting flesh pierced his ears as if the blade was aimed straight into them.

**Fight harder.**

**Cowardidiotworthlessdefend yourselfwhy can’t you be good enough.**

Dave’s fingers twitched further. They jumped to his head, and each muscle was taught as he carefully raked them through his hair. He wanted to scratch, he wanted to pull, but he controlled himself. Bro would have been proud.

Dave barely noticed that Dirk had won his fight, much less the odd look Rose was giving him.

“We need to move before another group comes along,” she said. Dave nodded absently.

“Yeah, those gunshots probably didn’t go unheard.”

Jade nodded. “I wish I had a less attention-grabbing weapon, but it’s the best one we could have. I think we’ve proved ourselves to be a good team!”

She high-fived John and Dirk, who responded enthusiastically, and Rose, whose high-fiving was a little more subdued. When she reached Dave, he hesitated. It would be a dick move to leave her hanging.

He high-fived Jade lightly. She smiled, and in her green eyes there was a gentleness. Dave retracted his hand.

**You don’t deserve them.**

***

“Are you all right?” Rose murmured. “Not to be intrusive, but you look like you’re either about to have or are in the middle of having a panic attack.”

“’M fine,” Dave said shortly. He walked closer to the rest of the group.

“I won’t push. But if you aren’t, I would appreciate if you told me. A fight like this would be a stressful situation for anyone, but I have the feeling that you have more reason to be stressed than the average individual. I shouldn’t like to wonder how you’re feeling right now.”

“It’s a good thing you don’t need to wonder, then.”

“Dave--” Rose began. But John was giving them a curious look, and she went quiet. Dave thanked his lucky stars for her respect of his privacy.

“Yeah, no. I’ve always been on my own,” Dirk was chatting with Jade. “I just kind of… exist. I don’t really have a ‘purpose’ or anything. I just walk around, do some work, accidentally get involved in weeaboo gang wars… Y’know. Standard drifter stuff.”

“Umm, that doesn’t really sound ‘standard’ to me.” Jade giggled.

“I dunno, Rose said you live on an island,” Dave cut in. “So maybe your perception of normality is
all skewed and shit. My home life was all doritos and puppets, and that was normal. What’s normal to you, jungle girl?”

“I don’t know, but it definitely doesn’t include anime gang wars. I mean, seriously, what?”

“You know what would be better?” John chimed in. “Ghost wars.”

“Oh my god, John--”

“Holy shit,” Dave said loudly.

The others followed his gaze and fell into a similar state of awe and anticipation.

Down the street, a ship hovered. It was bright red, just like the large one that hovered over the city, but much smaller, about the size of a car. It was clearly alien in origin. It took the shape of a pod, with a windshield of some clear material, and a gun protruding from the top.

A gun protruding from the top that was beginning to glow in a way that Dave was definitely not a fan of.

“That’s new,” John said worriedly. “Run?”

The gun brightened, accompanied by a sound like a small jet engine revving, then exploded into a beam that they were barely able to dodge. The girls and Dirk jumped out of range, Dave shoving John away before he could be hurt.

The laser held strong for several seconds before dissipating. When it disappeared, the street that had occupied the space before had been completely melted.

”Run!” the humans yelled in unison.

They turned on the spot and tore off down the street, the ship in hot pursuit.

Dave knew that he could probably run faster than any of them. Had any of them had to genuinely run for their lives before? He thought not. Still, he restrained his ability, and lagged behind. Most of the group were fairly fast, but John was not so lucky.

“Come on, dude,” he said. “You’ve got this.”

“How,” John gasped. “Can, you, talk while, running?”

“Practice. But you don’t need to worry about that. You need to worry about keeping up with me, because if you don’t, you’re fucking dead. No way to sugar-coat that.”

John looked wildly over his shoulder. “Oh, fuck, fuck, I’m so dead.”

“No, you aren’t.” Dave felt the familiar calm that came along with near-death experiences settling over him. His heartbeat slowed its pace, the speed beginning to fuel his thoughts instead. There had to be a way out. “Keep your breathing steady. Like you’re breathing through a straw, see? It’ll keep you going. Just focus on breathing, and everything else will come easy.”

John obeyed as best he could. Dave could see him attempting to slow his puffing for air into something smoother. But it wasn’t fast enough. The ship was gaining on them, and if they didn’t speed up, they’d be shot.

“Okay,” Dave said. “New plan.”
Dave sent out a quick prayer, scooped John into his arms, and took off. He didn’t know how he managed to carry the boy. Walking, it would have been no trouble. Dave was plenty strong. But running? It was pure adrenaline alone that saved them.

John gripped tightly onto Dave’s neck. “Holy fuck. Are you saving my life right now? Because I’m pretty sure that’s what you’re doing, holy shit, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Dave wheezed. “You’re still heavy as hell, don’t think I won’t drop you if you keep, restricting my air like that, Jesus.”

John quickly let go of Dave’s neck and gripped his shoulders instead. “Oops. Sorry. You know, if we weren’t being hunted down by aliens, this might be kind of fun!”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Jade, Rose, and Dirk were up ahead, looking over their shoulders in concern, but not slowing down. Dave pointed to Jade’s gun, swinging at her side.

“We can take it!” he yelled. “Aim for the pilot!”

Jade’s eyes widened. “I don’t know if I can shoot it while it moves!” she called back.

“It’s our only chance,” Dave said, his voice trailing off into a gasp for air. Yelling was not the best idea.

Jade seemed to understand. She said something to Rose, stumbled to a halt, and turned around. Plating her feet, she raised her gun.

The first bullet glanced off the ship’s windshield. Jade blanched. The ship’s gun was beginning to glow again. She fired thrice more in rapid succession, and as her shots battered the same point, a crack appeared. The roar of the alien gun grew and grew.

Jade fired once more and threw her rifle to the side just in time to avoid being vaporized. The glass-like material of the windshield shattered, and the ship veered off course.

Dave took its moment of weakness as an opportunity to scoop up Jade’s gun. He paused by her side to toss it back to her. As the ship began to right itself, her eyes narrowed, and she shot into the cockpit.

From a distance, there was no immediate way to tell if she had met her mark. Dave tapped her shoulder to indicate that they should keep going. John slid out of his arms, his strength regained, and the three ran without hesitation.

The ship wasn’t gaining any ground, so Dave assumed Jade had successfully shot someone inside. He was mentally congratulating her when the aliens retaliated.

The laser cut straight through his shoulder, a thousand times worse than a bullet. He screamed in pain and fell to the ground.

John skidded to a stop. “Dave!”

Dave could barely muster a reply through the haze of agony. His shoulder burned like fire, and he could already feel blood beginning to pour from the wound. “Keep going, idiot!”

“No way, dude! We’re all in this together, remember?” John hesitated, his hands fluttering around
Dave’s shoulders, before hoisting him up his waist. Dave would have made a sarcastic joke about taking him out for dinner first if he wasn’t busy trying not to black out.

The manner in which John dragged Dave along was exceedingly undignified. Dave was glad when Jade hurried back to help carry him.

“What’re you doing?” he said weakly. “Keep going. Y’all are a bunch of fuckin’ idiots, they’ll catch us…”

“Nope! That is not going to happen. Dirk! Can you help us?” Jade yelled.

She passed Dave off to Dirk like a sack of potatoes, then turned back to the faltering ship. “Fuck off,” she muttered. She fired her gun with a bang, then cursed again. “Shit. I’m running out of ammo. Guys, we’ll need to get back to the car.”

“We need to get medical stuff, too,” John said worriedly. “That doesn’t look like it’s going to stop bleeding.”

“Then do something about it,” Dave groaned.

“Let me,” said Dirk. He peeled off his shirt, and, with a few twists of the fabric, affixed it to Dave’s wound. “It’s not much, but it’ll hold until we can get you bandaged up. Sound cool?”

“Ice cold.” Dave’s lips curled into a smile. The searing pain in his shoulder was fading away, replaced by a feeling of giddiness rushing through his veins. He wanted to laugh. “Alright alright alright alright, ha ha, oh man, wha…”

“He’s delirious,” said Rose. When had she gotten there? “We need to stop him from going into shock. Jade?”

“You got it.”

There came several sharp cracks, and Dave winced. Rose leaned in close to him. He was tempted to tell her he wasn’t interested in kissing her, or any girl for that matter, but she looked too serious for that to be her intent. “Dave,” she said slowly. “I need you to focus on me.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “Focusing… Hey, d’you know your eyes are pink?”

“Jade,” Rose warned.

“I said, I’ve got it! I think I hit the pilot, but now it’s going all over the place and I can’t aim well.”

Dave snorted out a laugh. “Hey, hey, I just thought of something funnier than twenty four, guys, hey.”

“Jade!”

_Crack._

“Got it!”

_Crash._

Dave tried to look over Dirk’s shoulder, but he was being held too tightly to see. “Aw, man, I was jus’ gonna say four twenty, what th’ fuck jus’ happ…”
The pain in his shoulder disappeared, along with the scene around him.

***

“Ow, fuck, ow.”

Dave winced and opened his eyes. His shoulder hurt like fuck, how had that happened? It took him a second to remember. “Oh. Yeah.”

“You’re awake!” said John. “Wow, you might’ve just been sleeping. It’s nighttime now.”

“Sorry, but I didn’t really have control over how long I was unconscious. Cause. Y’know. I was unconscious.” Dave looked around. He was lying in the far back seat of a car. Not the one he had arrived in, but the one that had belonged to John’s father. Around him were piles of bloodied bandages and discarded medicines. John sat in one of the middle seats, and Rose and Dirk were in the two front. “Jesus. It looks like the apocalypse in here.”

“Well, duh. It kind of is.” Jade sat up in the seat beside John. “We were really lucky to get here in time! You were bleeding really bad.”

“How did you even get me here?”

“Girl wonder over there shot down an alien ship,” Dirk responded. “Before, I wasn’t sure about joining you guys, but damn, I am now.”

“We’ve got some stuff to fill you in on, too,” Jade said eagerly. “We worked while you were asleep. Rose, show him the helmet!”


“No like this, you haven’t.” Rose passed him the helmet. “Put it on.”

Dave took his shades off before sliding the helmet down over his ears. When he had worn it before, he had noticed the dark tint to the visor. Now, it was lit up. Video feeds and rolling strips of text filled it to the brim, and as he blinked, the view shifted. “Woah.” He couldn’t even think of a joke to crack, the technology was too stunning.

“Now press the button on the left side of the base,” Rose instructed. Dave did as he was told, and a new array of text was displayed. Each line was in a different color. The alphabet was unfamiliar, all curves and spikes, an indecipherable rainbow.

“Okay. What’s this?”

“Note that each color present is one that we have identified as a blood color. Do you see those colons there?”

“Yeah, why?” Dave scrolled through the walls of text. Olive green was the predominant color, with large sections of indigo and maroon.

“Does the format not look familiar?” Rose asked. “Prefixes followed by colons, followed by text? With different colors to distinguish between speakers?”

“N…” Dave paused, and it clicked. “This looks like Pesterchum.”

“Precisely. Now, it’s a rather large jump to make from just some formatting, but if this is a messaging system…” Rose took a deep breath. “Then it would mean the race invading us are fully sentient, and
are capable of forming bonds strong enough to warrant frequent digital communication.”

“Well, shit.” Dave took the helmet off. “What does that mean for us?”

“Not so fast.” Rose pushed the helmet back down. “Press the button on the right.” Dave pressed it, and a new application opened. “Do you see the library-looking arrangement?”

Sure enough, a selection not unlike Netflix was displayed on the screen before Dave’s eyes. Even stranger, all the titles were ones he recognized. The words scrawled across the pictures were in English. He even thought he spied Adam Sandler’s face. “What the hell are aliens doing with our movies?”

“While that remains a relevant question, it is not the purpose of this technological tour. There should be a larger button beside the one you just pushed which acts as a mouse. Use it to ‘scroll up’ and ‘click’ the blue text in the upper left corner.”

Dave traced along the edge of the helmet before locating the button. When his fingers glided across it, a cursor appeared on the screen and moved with him. He guided it up and clicked.

The screen shifted to display two empty white boxes, as well as two circles. The circles each had a symbol within them. “Sooo, what does this do?” he asked.

“Click the left circle and speak,” Rose directed him.

Dave pressed the button in place of clicking, then cleared his throat. “One, two, fuck you, what is this supposed to do. Three, four, your mom’s a whore, what am I testing this thing for?”

The helmet beeped, then, after a moment, text began to appear in the box on the right. Dave’s mouth fell open. “Rose, is that what I think it is?” He took off the helmet.

Rose was smiling. “I believe it was initially meant to be some sort of subtitling program, but yes. For our intents and purposes, it is a translator.”

“I’m going to translate the entire script of Bee Movie,” Dave murmured. John giggled.

“I think we should try it out more tomorrow!” said Jade. “We need to start getting serious. Today we found out that there are smaller ships roaming around, but also that we can take them down. We need to find more bullets somewhere, and get more members… But as soon as we do that, we can start fighting for real!”

“I can help with getting members,” said Dirk. “I’ve got a friend out in Kansas, I don’t think she’d mind fighting. Maybe I could go and get her.”

Jade looked concerned. “You aren’t suggesting you go alone?”

He shrugged. “I’ve always been on my own, remember? And it won’t be forever. As soon as I found her, we’d meet up with you guys again, and then you’d have two more people on your side.”

Jade pursed her lips. “I don’t know… It’s dangerous out there. Can we all sleep on it?”

“Sure.” Dirk shifted in his seat so his head rested more comfortably, then went quiet. His breathing began to slow into something deeper. Dave was sort of envious. He had never been able to fall asleep so easily, unless, of course, he was knocked unconscious. That was pretty easy.

One by one, each member of the so-called Resistance drifted off. Dave was gifted with the
knowledge that John was a snorer, and a horrendously loud one at that. It came as a surprise when he
didn’t actually mind. It was almost… comforting. To hear something as normal as a snore in the
night, as opposed to an errant clang of metal or the whispers of puppets.

No matter what anyone said, those whispers were real. This was one of the first nights in as long as
Dave could remember that the murmurings had not haunted his sleep.

He took it as a good sign. An omen, perhaps, of fair fortune. Not of outright survival, but of
prolonged life. After all, that was the best you could hope for in the apocalypse.

And if you were Dave, it was a miracle that you could hope for that much at all.

Chapter End Notes

Side note: John and Jade are the only kids who are related in this fic. None of the
Strilondes or Harleyberts or alphas or betas are related except for them.
Karkat was restless. It was a feeling he knew all too well. Hiding from drones in his hive, being trapped in his sector on the Imperial ship, and now this. He’d thought it would get easier once they landed. But the surface of the planet Earth drove him every bit as stir-crazy as the rest of his miserable life.

This was obviously just another side effect of what Dave had done to him, Karkat thought. Just another way that damn human had fucked up his pan. He could not let it continue.

This was the thought process that led him to break away from his team.

If they had known in advance, they would have stopped him. They would have called him sleep-deprived, irrational, sick. Nothing he hadn’t been called before, but it still would have been annoying to wade through their comments.

Instead, Karkat stole away quietly. While he was out with Eridan, the violet-blood absorbed in gossiping about something or other, he backed up in the opposite direction. Eridan hardly noticed as he disappeared into an alley. Of course, Karkat heard him start yelling a few minutes later, but by then it was too late. A spontaneous fervor had taken hold of him, and nothing was going to stop him now.

He was on a mission. Find Dave, and make him pay.

Karkat only realized how large the city was once he was on his own. It was smaller than the previous one, sure, but there was still a lot of ground to cover.

He would start where he had last seen Dave, and work from there, he decided. That gave him a smaller area to search.

It was easy to retrace his steps and find the place where he had seen the group of humans. Karkat followed the landmarks, mostly buildings fallen in a certain way, or specific vehicles, and quickly found what he was looking for. The street which Dave had walked was empty now. Karkat hadn’t expected to find his target instantly, but he still sighed a little when he thought of the work ahead of him.

The work ahead was boring, exactly he had anticipated. Karkat wished he had the tracking skills of a legislacerator, or even a lusus with a powerful sense of smell. Having to walk aimlessly around in the
hopes of spying a familiar pair of shades was just a chore.

It would be worth it, though, once he found Dave. Karkat kept himself going by savoring the images, (prophecies, more like), of himself punching Dave in the face.

His search took him far away from the store where the rest of his squadron dwelled. He tried not to think of how they would be reacting. Kanaya would be worrying, Vriska would scoff at her sentimentality, Sollux would probably keep programming and not even notice. Terezi would order a full-scale troll hunt to get him back. Little did she know, Karkat didn’t want to be found.

What if he didn’t even find Dave? Ugh, that would be embarrassing. Having to crawl back to the friends he ditched… Karkat shoved the thoughts down. He would be much more useful to them once his pan was fixed, after all.

Karkat kept to the sides of the roads, always checking to make sure there were no other trolls around. The fresh pigmentation of his glance nuggets had not been forgotten. He scowled. His and Dave’s were similar now. Just another reason to hate his biology.

Karkat was so lost in his thoughts, he wouldn’t have even noticed the blood if it hadn’t been for the smell.

He was barely paying attention to the world around him when it hit his snort barrels. It was a metallic smell, a tang that seemed to thicken as he breathed it in. Blood. Human blood. And smoke, too, he realized. The assault on his cartilaginous nub was enough to make him remember his surroundings. He stopped to look around.

In front of him was a pool of red blood, darkened with age. It was fresh enough to smell, but old enough that it had dried. Drops of it formed a trail down the road. Karkat walked along it, wondering what kind of incompetent soldier would leave a human with enough breath to haul itself away. Why not just kill it? And what was that smoky scent, anyway?

He stopped.

Beside him was a ship. It was small and pod-shaped, and clearly Imperial, judging by the logo on the side. It had crashed, and lay on the ground with its front looking thoroughly destroyed. Its windshield had shattered. Karkat couldn’t see any trolls inside, and he sure as hell didn’t want to look. The ship was smoking slightly.

Who could have done this?

Not humans. They weren’t strong enough! Karkat hadn’t seen any with explosives, and he had no reason to believe that any alien could just fell an Imperial pod like that.

Unless…

He scowled. There was one human who might have been able to. The one human who seemed to fuck everything up. He didn’t know how Dave could possibly have done it, but it seemed like the type of miraculous fuckup he’d be capable of.

It was even more critical now that Karkat found him.

Karkat quickened his pace, trotting down the road along the trail of blood. The drops began to decrease in number as he went. Evidently, whoever had been injured had found some way to stem the blood flow. Karkat was left to fill in the gaps, connecting the splotches of red into a violent,
patchwork path.

His efforts led him to a lone white vehicle. Beyond it, all traces of blood ceased. One of the doors was half-open.

Karkat cautiously climbed inside.

It was empty, aside from some human stocks. There were nutrition cylinders stacked between the seats, and several open medical kits. Bloodstained and discarded bandages littered the back seat. Karkat smirked. Try as you might, you couldn’t stop nature. He hoped whatever human had been injured had bled out.

His smirk turned to a frown as he noticed something sitting in the back seat that was decidedly not human. It was a helmet, exactly like the one he was wearing. He picked it up.

The half-open vehicle door slammed shut, and Karkat jumped. Fuck. A human had come into the front seat, and it would notice him any second. He ducked down among the nutrition cylinders. Fighting in such close quarters would be difficult, and if the humans had good weapons, he might be done for.

However, the human did not turn around. Karkat chanced a peek at it. It had long dark hair, and seemed to be… humming to itself? If he was not trying to be stealthy, he would snort at the thing’s antics.

Wait a second.

He caught a glimpse of its face in profile. It wore a pair of thick, round glasses, ones that seemed familiar. All humans looked alike to Karkat, but this one seemed significant.

As she called out, it became clear.

“Dave!” she yelled.

This was one of the humans Karkat’s rival had been walking with. And if she was calling to him, then that meant…

Dave appeared in the seat beside her, and the two exchanged words. Karkat swallowed a snarl. Not yet. He needed to get Dave alone, so none of his detestable friends could help him.

After a moment, both humans exited the vehicle. Karkat sat up and looked out the window. He watched as they retreated down the street, then crept out after them.

The two had joined three others, one of which Karkat didn’t recognize. They must have been recruiting. The new one had light hair, like Dave and one of the females, and a pair of shades even douchier than Dave’s. Karkat made a face. If he didn’t have a personal grudge against Dave, he would probably hate that one the most.

They walked down the street, oblivious to their pursuer. Karkat waited patiently. Eventually, they would split up, and then he would have his chance.

It was a long time before they split up.

They must have a small amount of sense, Karkat supposed. They knew that there were trolls all around. They just didn’t know how close. They kept together, traveling in a pack, for greater safety.
As Karkat gained on the humans, the faint scent of blood returned. His glance nuggets narrowed. Which of them had been injured?

If he looked closely, he could see a stiffness in the way Dave held one of his arms. There. It brought Karkat satisfaction to see him so inhibited.

Karkat grew closer and closer until he was a mere ten feet from the humans. He walked and walked, but they stubbornly refused to split up. He scowled. If they wouldn’t separate, he would have to make them.

The course of action Karkat planned was a gamble. If Dave was less docile than he suspected, he would be dead. If Dave couldn’t stop his friends from attacking, he would be dead. There were a great many things that could go wrong. But hate twisted his reason into something muddled, and the only thing that was clear was that Karkat had to get to Dave.

Karkat stepped directly behind his target, sunk his claws into the human’s shoulders, and pulled him sharply back. Dave shouted in unmistakable pain, and Karkat looked at where his claws had landed. Blood welled up around each puncture mark. Oops. He had accidentally grabbed the human where he had been injured. In a moment of what was definitely not guilt, Karkat let the human go.

In the space of half a second, Dave had spun around, and all his friends had weapons pointed at Karkat. The long-haired one with glasses had her finger on the trigger of a rifle. Karkat prepared to knock the gun from her hands, when Dave threw out his arms.

"Wait!"

Everyone stood stock still. Karkat looked straight into Dave’s glance nuggets. He couldn’t tell if the human was looking back. Those damn shades. Karkat’s prongs balled into fists. Ugh, why couldn’t he just take the sunglasses off? Everything about him was so fucking infuriating.

Dave said something to the girl holding the gun, and they had a short argument. She reluctantly lowered her weapon, and the others did the same. The other one with shades was giving Karkat a very odd look.

The one with short dark hair said something, then took off. Karkat watched him hurry down the street and turn a corner. Then he looked back to Dave.

“I really want to fucking hit you right now, but if I do, these lunatics will shoot me,” he said, knowing Dave would not understand. “You look fucking hideous. Did you get shot? Your shoulder sure looks like it. How the fuck did you manage to bring a pod down, anyway?”

Dave laughed. It began jabbering right back at Karkat, who frowned. They probably looked like idiots, each rambling in a language the other did not understand.

The short-haired human came back, and in his hands was the helmet Karkat had seen in the vehicle’s back seat. He eyed it curiously. How had they gotten it? What were they using it for?

The human put the helmet on and said something.

To Karkat’s astonishment, the words it spoke came out in Alternian.

“Hi, I’m John! Can you understand me?”

“How did you do that?” Karkat asked. The human fumbled around with the buttons on the helmet’s side before speaking again. The voice was electronic, Karkat realized, generated by the helmet. But it
was quite obviously a translation of whatever it was the human was saying.

“Can you say that again? I didn’t hit the button in time to record you.”

Karkat snorted, but waited a few moments before repeating himself. “How did you figure out how to use that?”

The human shrugged. The helmet relayed its message: “Not sure. We just kind of fooled around with it for a while.”

Karkat sneered. “So, what do you want with me, then?” He himself hadn’t known the translation feature existed, but he thought it best to act superior. The humans would never know.

“We just want to know what you want! Why are you invading us?”

It was Karkat’s turn to shrug. “Dunno, wasn’t my choice. Give the translator to that one.” He pointed to Dave. The human took off the helmet, and, looking perplexed, handed it to his companion. Dave took off his shades before he put it on. Karkat caught a quick glimpse of red irises before the visor descended over Dave’s face.

“What’s your name?” he said, surprising Karkat. What the fuck kind of first question was that? No “where is your leader?” No “please don’t kill me?”

“Karkat,” he said.

“Cool. I’m Dave.” Next came the question Karkat had been dreading. “Why didn’t you kill me, that one time?”

Karkat looked away. “No reason,” he muttered. “You looked fucking horrible, and I figured I’d be treating you worse by leaving you alive.” It was mostly the truth. It was what Karkat told himself, at least.

Dave laughed. “Well, you’re not wrong.”

Karkat began to speak, then waited for Dave to adjust the translator. He started again. “So. This is the whole reason I tracked you down, so you’d better have a goddamn good answer. What did you do to my think pan? What the fuck did you do?” His question melted into a snarl, and he stepped closer without realizing. The other humans jumped, but Dave looked unfazed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, dude,” he said. The monotonous computerized voice only made his reponse more annoying.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, shitsponge,” Karkat snapped. “You did something to me. I don’t know how, but you did. You made it so I don’t function right.”

Dave still looked confused. “I literally didn’t do anything.”

Karkat grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and pulled him close. “Don’t you fucking lie to me!” Up this close, he could see every flaw in Dave’s face, every pimple or freckle or dent. There were surprisingly few flaws to be found. The most visible marks were the still-healing scratches Karkat had given him, but that only made the troll angrier. “Why are you lying? It’s not going to get you anywhere! Just tell me the fucking truth so I can fix this!”

“I didn’t do anything,” Dave repeated. “Calm your tits.”
Karkat blinked. “What’s ‘tits?’”

Dave cracked up.

Karkat gripped his shirt tighter, and laid a single claw against the human’s ignorance shaft. “Stop fucking laughing.”

Dave’s laughter faded, though an errant chuckle occasionally escaped. “It just means, like, calm down. Don’t blow a gasket, dude.”

The human didn’t understand what a big deal this was, that much was obvious. Perhaps he would consent to fix what he had done if Karkat made him hurt. His claw switched across the human’s skin, drawing a thin red line of blood.

The other humans shouted and pulled Karkat off Dave. He growled at them. “I’ll stop as soon as he admits what he did.”

Dave shook his head in confusion. “I don’t know how to make you understand that I didn’t do anything. Whatever issues you’ve got going on are your own business.”

Karkat paused.

What if he was telling the truth? What if, deep down, Karkat really didn’t want to kill these dumb aliens? What kind of troll would that make him? Was he really nothing more than a mutant?

No. There had to be some other reason. If he did have ‘moral reservations,’ as Kanaya had put it, why did he want to hurt Dave so badly?

_Hurt_, a small voice in the back of his pan said. _Hurt, but not kill._

Fuck.

“I didn’t mean to make you have a mental breakdown,” Dave said. “You don’t look so good.”

“You don’t look so good, either, but I think that’s unrelated to your mental health,” Karkat muttered. “You’re just as ugly as every other human.”

“Hey, now. You know you love me.”

Karkat bristled. How could Dave say something like that? He was pretty sure it was a joke, but still. They weren’t even from the same planet! “I do not, you abhorrent fuck. I _hate_ you!”

Karkat blushed a bit. He hadn’t actually meant to say that, it had just slipped out. “Platonically!” he added.

Dave looked amused. “How do you hate someone platonically?”

Karkat was tempted to walk away at that point. What the hell? Did romance dominate every relationship between these fucked-up aliens? Of course platonic hate existed. That was what he felt for Dave. Pure, platonic hate and nothing more.

He was about to launch into an explanation of the differences between romantic and platonic hatred when the helmet was wrested from Dave’s nugbone. The other douche with shades had stolen it. He put it on and addressed Karkat.

“Hi, I’m Dirk, and I’ve got a question for you.”
“Hello, Dirk human. Remind me why you thought it was polite to interrupt my fucking conversation?”

“Because I’ve got something more important to ask you.” Even with the computer-generated voice, Dirk sounded serious, enough that Karkat rejected the idea of ignoring him out of spite. “You’re Karkat Vantas, aren’t you?”

Karkat’s brow furrowed. “How do you know my full name?”

The human smirked. “Easy. I’d never forget those horns. The eyes are new, though, threw me off a little.”

“What?” Karkat was torn between confusion and aggression. “Stop being cryptic. How the fuck do you know my name?”

“Damn, do you not remember? We used to hang out all the time, you know, when Delilah was living around here.”

“I don’t understand.” Karkat’s lips curled into their default position; a defensive scowl.

Dirk frowned. “Don’t you remember?”

“No. What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Delilah Vantas, man, come on. Your mom. You were just a little kid the last time I saw you, a baby. You don’t remember any of it?”

Karkat’s glance nugget twitched. “Stop saying that. I don’t know what you mean.”

At those words, something seemed to dawn on Dirk. “Ohhh. You really don’t remember any of it, you must have been too young, you… Karkat. You were born on Earth. You’re part human.”

It started with a burning feeling, ripping upwards from Karkat’s blood pusher and tearing through his ignorance shaft to explode in a scream. "No, I’m not!"

He didn’t know what this human was playing at, but he did know that the species was much crueler than he knew. Dirk was playing off his insecurities, trying to make him believe that he was even more fucked up than he’d previously thought, yes, that was it. Except…

That vision.

When Karkat had seen Dave’s glance nuggets for the first time, a scene had flashed through his pan. It didn’t feel like a prophecy, or a hallucination, or anything like that. It felt like a memory.

The troll with stubby horns, just like his, and red glance nuggets, just like his. The adult who looked up into a sky that could never have been found on Alternia. It was too colorful. In fact, when Karkat looked up, he saw a sky that was similar, all blues and fluffy clouds.

Through the jumble of alien words like “mom” and “born,” Karkat could piece together the meaning of what Dirk had said.

He had been hatched on Earth.

Dave was wearing the helmet again. “You okay?” he asked.

“Does it fucking look like I’m okay?”
Karkat glared at Dave, and the familiar anger, black and hot, began to pool inside his pump biscuit. Not even Dirk’s revelation had made him feel like this. What the fuck was going on?

Oh, fuck it all. He might as well accept it. His life was going to enough shit as it was.

Karkat Vantas was a mutant, a partly-human freak, and to top it all off, he had a crush on an alien.

_Shoot me now._

Chapter End Notes

A few news-y things.

1. Pretty soon, I'll be going away for several summer camps and vacations. I'll try my best to keep up weekly updates, but my schedule might slip a little.

2. I'm running a voice acting group! Check us out (or audition!!) at our tumblr, alterniasgottalent, or our like-named YouTube channel.

3. As always, thank you for reading. :)
Give Peace A Chance

Chapter Summary

"No, I don't hate you
Don't want to fight you
Know I'll always love you but right now I just don't like you"

-Which To Bury Us Or The Hatchet, Relient K

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You think he’s okay?”

Dave glanced at the car, in which Karkat had shut himself for the past three hours. “I think the chances of him being okay are a resounding ‘zero.’ Why do you think it affected him so bad?”

Dirk shrugged. “He just got the pants shocked off him. Can’t say I blame him. I mean, to him, we’re aliens. He just found out that he’s half alien.”

“Oh, yeah. I can see why that would be surprising.” The car’s windows were tinted, and no matter how he squinted, he couldn’t see through them. He supposed it would be easier if he took his shades off.

Fuck that. He would just have to accept his inability to see Karkat.

“I believe someone should go and speak with him,” said Rose. “I hate to sound inhumane, but this is an unbelievable chance to learn more about their species and intentions. Perhaps we could learn something important.”

“I guess I’ll go, then,” Dave said. The translator-slash-helmet had been left on the hood of the car. He grabbed it, slipping his shades off in a way that no one would see his eyes, then put it on.

When he grabbed at the car door handle, he found it to be locked from the inside.

“Come on,” he groaned. “Let me in, dude.” The helmet dutifully relayed his message, but he thought the meaning of his words would probably get across even without it. He knocked on the window.

It rolled down a crack. Karkat said something in a contemptuous tone. The helmet informed Dave that it had been “fuck you.”

“I just want to talk. You can kick me out if you want.” Dave kept rapping at the window. He turned his drumming into a beat, using both hands to pound away at the glass. Maybe if reason wouldn’t work, sheer annoyance would get him inside.

The door flew open after two more minutes of knocking.

“Get in, shitsnorter,” Karkat growled.
“Yeah, about that,” said Dave as he clambered inside. “You swear a whole fucking lot. You should teach me how to say shit in your language. Like, specifically the word shit. Do you have multiple languages on your planet? Because we have like, a hundred here, and one thing people do is they learn foreign languages and swear in front of people so they won’t understand—”

“Shut up.”

Karkat was curled up in the back seat, trying and failing to not look miserable. Without the fangs and horns, his pouting might have been kind of adorable. It was kind of adorable anyway.

Dave sat between the two front seats, facing back towards Karkat. “So. What’re you thinking about?” He hated how the translator made his words sound so flat. Now was a time to sound sympathetic, not robotic.

“I’m thinking that you should go choke on your own bulge.” Karkat scowled and turned to the side. His profile was pretty nice, Dave couldn’t help noticing. As a photographer, he had an eye for good faces, and despite its alien qualities, Karkat’s was striking. His features were strange, but not in a bad way. There was an otherworldly quality to him that you wouldn’t notice upon first glance. You would just feel it. There was something a little too sharp in his jawline, his eyes a little too defined. It was strange and somehow beautiful.

Dave would be tempted to get out his camera if he wasn’t busy trying to console the guy.

Karkat noticed his expression and scowled further. He shoved Dave backwards, just enough for the human to lose his balance, but not enough that he couldn’t regain it.

When Dave sat back up, Karkat was giving him a strange look. His yellow eyes were wide, his lips parted slightly.

“What’s up?” Dave asked.

“Can I see that helmet for a second?”

Dave shrugged. “Whatever you want, man.” He slipped off the helmet, casting his eyes downward as he did so. He handed it off to Karkat, and the alien exchanged it for his own.

After a minute of fiddling around, Karkat pulled it off and passed it back to Dave.

“What was that about?” Dave said, amused.

“Nothing,” Karkat muttered. “I, uh.... I just recognized something on it.”

“I get it. Little things are probably messing you up right now, right? You just basically found out that your whole life is a lie. You thought you were pure alien, but it turns out you’re only half alien.”

Karkat glared at him. “We’re not just called ‘aliens,’ you insensitive prick. I’m a troll. Or an Alternian, if you want to be formal.”

Dave raised an eyebrow. “Alternian, huh? Does that make your planet Alternia?”

“Yes.” Karkat didn’t seem to want to say anything else. He was like a moody teenager, refusing to make conversation with its parents. Dave tried again.

“Didn’t you ever realize you were different?”

“No. On Alternia, being different gets you killed.” Karkat’s glare only strengthened. Dave frowned.
Something seemed different…

He slid down the visor of the helmet and looked closer. Karkat snarled and backed away, but Dave had seen enough. He put the visor back down. “Your eyes are red now. How come?”

Karkat was silent a long time before answering.

“Natural pigmentation,” he finally said. Dave could hear the bitterness in his voice even before the helmet translated his words. “When trolls develop, their glance nugget color gradually changes to match their blood color.”

Dave snorted. “You call eyes \textit{glance nuggets}?”

“Yes. Don’t be speciesist.”

“Whatever. Why is your eye color changing a bad thing, though? You sound like somebody shit all over your favorite sweater.”

“It’s bad because I’m a fucking mutant,” Karkat snapped. “Nobody has red blood. Nobody. If anyone saw this, I’d be culled on the spot.”

Dave’s eyebrows shot up. “Right. Individuality gets you killed.”

“It’s more than just that. Our entire society is built around blood color. Everything about your standard of living is dictated by if you bleed brown or green or purple. But red-bloods? I’m not even \textit{on} the hemocaste. I’m not supposed to exist.” Karkat turned back to face Dave. There was a vulnerability in his scarlet eyes, but it was covered by the fiercest look Dave had ever seen.

“Maybe your blood is different because you’re not fully ali-- Alternian?”

Karkat nodded. “That’s what I’ve been thinking. So, really, I should just kill you right now. The existence of your species made my life a living hell, and somebody’s got to pay for that.”

“Hey, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t murder me.” Try as he did, Dave couldn’t be scared of Karkat. Not after the guy had just confessed his life story. All he could feel was pity. “If my species didn’t exist, you wouldn’t have been born.”

“Maybe that would have been better than this.”

“That’s just about the saddest thing I ever heard get said.” As if Dave hadn’t felt the same way more times than he could count. “Here, try this. Instead of blaming my innocent planet, why not blame yours? Rebel a little. I mean, they’re the ones who made blood color a federal fucking issue. Here on Earth, you’re just a normal guy.”

Karkat rolled his eyes. “Rebellion’s another thing on that long list of stuff that’ll get you killed.”

“Yeah, but you’re not on Alternia anymore, dude. We play it different here on Earth. You can rebel all you want, and sometimes, it actually changes things.”

Karkat looked away. “I ran away from my friends to come here, you know. My intention was to find out what you’d done that made me so fucked up, but I guess it wasn’t you. It’s just part of me. I don’t know what to fucking do. Now I’ll have to go crawling back to them, I guess.”

“You’re dodging the question.” Dave scooched closer. “Why not rebel with us?”

“Did you not understand anything I just said?” Karkat snapped. “I can’t rebel, because then I’d be
fighting against the only people who’ve ever treated me like more than dirt. I can’t betray my friends.”

“If they really treat you that well, they’ll understand,” said Dave. He tried to keep the frustration out of his voice. He didn’t want to argue with Karkat, and he sure as hell didn’t want to sound preachy, but the troll’s problem didn’t seem impossible to fix. It would take work and emotional investment, sure. But Dave figured Karkat was pretty used to dealing with emotional stuff. His entire life was made of challenges, and this would just be another. The only difference was that this could be the last.

“You don’t understand!” Karkat squeezed at one of his arms. “You don’t understand anything. They wouldn’t help. They’re sane, so they know the only thing to do is to keep going the way we are.”

“What’s wrong with insanity?” Dave threw up his hands. “Dude, you can handle it. From the way you’ve described your planet, it sounds shitty, and you must’ve been strong as hell to get through it. You’re strong enough to do this. This can be your way out. With actual trolls on our side, Earth might stand a chance at winning.”

“I don’t care about winning,” Karkat growled. “I just want to get out of here. I don’t care if your planet burns. I don’t want to deal with this shit anymore!”

“And this way, you wouldn’t have to.” Dave took a deep breath. It was no use yelling at Karkat. Dave probably didn’t know the half of his situation, and fighting wouldn’t make Karkat inclined to agree with him. “Look. Will you just consider it? If you fight with us, you won’t have to hide, and you’ll actually be fucking appreciated. Humans have this thing called showing gratitude. You’d be a huge asset to us, and a friend, too. We’re not going to kill you over blood color. We’re not going to let anything happen to you.”

As he spoke, it occurred to him that this was exactly the pep talk he needed.

John and Jade were friendly to him, which was a first. Rose seemed grateful for the information he could provide. Overall, they were welcoming, and didn’t make him feel like scratching his own face off. They weren’t safe, but they were the closest thing to safety he had ever felt.

He hoped Karkat could come to feel the same way.

Dave didn’t know when he’d become so invested in the troll, but he definitely was. Maybe it started the very first moment, when Karkat had spared his life. Maybe it had started with the translator. Being able to communicate with Karkat exactly how he would another human was a catalyst. This alien was more than just an alien. He was a person. He had lived a similar life to Dave’s own, and Dave would have to be heartless not to want to get to know Karkat a little better.

And letting Karkat go back into a place where he could be killed just because someone saw his eyes? That would be a dick move.

Karkat seemed to be calming down as well. His words were still venomous, but they lacked the sting they had previously possessed. “It really isn’t that easy. I don’t want to put my friends in danger. Being friends with me is enough of a risk on their part, asking them to fight against the Condesce would be fucking unthinkable.” He hesitated. “So, sorry. I guess. But I’m not staying here.”

“The Condesce?” Dave said, curious.

“Yeah, she’s the big boss. Her blood color is super rare and higher than everybody else, she has an
unhealthy interest in bedazzling, and she’s a stupid old fish bitch. End of story.”

“Wait, hold on. You can’t just drop a description like that and call it a day.”

“Too bad that’s exactly what I’m doing.” Karkat pushed open the side door and left the car, adjusting his visor to hide his entire face.

Dave followed him, taking off his helmet and replacing it with his sunglasses. “Guys,” he called. "Karkat’s fucking off. He’s not gonna sell us out to his alien buddies or anything, or, at least, I hope he isn’t. But we’ll be okay without him. He doesn’t want to stay and I’m not gonna argue with him anymore.”

“All right. Did you discuss any diplomatic subjects?” said Rose.

Dave shook his head. “Nah, we just kinda chilled. I did learn some stuff about his species, though, I’ll tell you later.”

Karkat stood awkwardly to the side. After a moment, he pressed the button on his helmet and said something.

“Bye, I guess. Dave. Can I get a word with you?”

“Sure, man.”

Karkat paused. “In private.”

Dave grinned. “Yeah. Back in the car?”

“No, just… The rest of you idiot humans. Don’t listen.”

There was a glint in Rose’s eye that suggested some sort of analysis going on, but she gathered the rest of the group and took them down the street a ways.

Karkat marched up uncomfortably close to Dave. He shoved his visor up, squinting defiantly in the sunlight. “All right,” he announced. “I fucking hate myself for this, just so you know. But I didn’t want to just walk away, in case there was a chance you… You know. Anyway.”

Before Dave knew what was happening, Karkat had grabbed his shirt collar by one hand, and slapped him in the face with the other.

“You’re repulsive,” Karkat hissed. “Literally, just being this close to you is making me nauseous. Decades after you make some stupid mistake and are publicly hanged for your idiocy, scholars will wax poetic on the awe-inspiring extent of your hideousness. And I will be the most whimsical, most disgusted fucking individual of any of them. Fuck you. I know this seems sudden, but my hate is a flaming force that cannot be contained. I hope you get hit by a bus. Goodbye, Dave. If we ever see each other again, remember that I hate you.”

He let go of Dave’s shirt and trudged off in the opposite direction. Before he turned, Dave could see his face, blushing bright red with what must have been anger.

What the fuck just happened?

***

“I’m sick of driving,” John complained. “Can we just get bikes?”
“Yes, biking to Kansas sounds like a brilliant idea,” said Rose. “Do let me know when you invent a bicycle advanced enough to shield us from enemy fire, carry us long distances in short periods of time, and contain cupholders.”

John rolled his eyes. “I was kidding. I just don’t want to be in the back seat next time! It’s cramped.”

“Amen to that,” Dave agreed. “Dibs on the passenger’s side.”

“You’ll never take it from me!” said Jade.

“All of you, shut up,” said Dirk from the driver’s seat. “I don’t remember all of this route. Stop distracting me.”

Rose’s brow furrowed. “Wait, you don’t remember all of it?”

“It’s been a while since I’ve driven the whole trip. There are only a couple bits and pieces missing, don’t worry. I’ll get us there.” Dirk’s eyes did not leave the road. “We’ll be with my friend in no time.”

“Oh, god,” John said suddenly. “We’re going to be picking up more people.”

Dave realized what John meant when he saw the horrified expression that accompanied the words. “Yeahhhh, there’s not enough room in here for that.”

Dirk laughed. “Don’t worry, I’m pretty sure her dad has a minivan. We can just split into the two cars. That way there’ll be more room for everyone.”

“Who is this friend, anyway?” Jade piped up. “I need to know about her in advance so I can greet her properly!”

“Her name’s Jane. Jane Crocker. She’s cool, she’s just a big nerd, honestly. She likes detective movies, pranking, and baking. She can help us kill aliens by laying epic practical jokes on them. They’ll see how hard they got owned and instantly surrender.”

John sighed. “She would sound so cool if it weren’t for her last name.”

Jade groaned. “John, noooo. Please don’t let your silly bias against Betty Crocker keep you from making friends with someone!”

Dirk raised an eyebrow. “Bias against Betty Crocker?”

“She’s horrible!” John insisted. “She’s got her fingers in everything. And her cakes don’t even taste good. Jade, you’ve got to agree with me on that one, you’ve had my dad’s cakes. They’re so much better.”

“John, Betty Crocker isn’t even a real person!”

“But you’ve got to agree that her company sucks!”

“I swear, if you ostracize someone just because their last name happens to be Crocker—”

“Uh, no,” said Dirk. “She’s literally the heiress to the Betty Crocker company.”

“I need to leave,” said John.

Rose sighed. “Can we please focus on driving?” She glanced at the clock on the dashboard. “We’ve
been traveling about three hours, we’ve got about eight left. Does anyone want to take a turn driving so the rest of us can sleep?”

“I can,” said Dave.

John gave him a dirty look. “You just want to get out of the back seat.”

“That is absolutely fucking correct, you are such a genius. And you are also a genius who’s going to be sleeping in the back seat.” Dave stuck up his middle finger as the car slowed to a halt. He climbed out, then switched places with Dirk. “Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for flying Strider Airlines. Unfortunately, this flight will only be traveling one foot above the ground, and it’ll be in a plane that looks suspiciously like a car. I hope none of you were looking forward to the plane peanuts, either, because we haven’t fucking got any. All we’ve got is doritos.”

The only response he got was a chorus of eye-rolls.

“You may visit the bathrooms only after the light goes on. The’re are simple to operate. All you gotta do is roll down the window. Also, the lights will never go on, you sick fucks.”

John thumped his face into the headrest of the seat in front of him.

“I don’t know if I can take eight hours of this.”

***

“Thank the sweet lord above!”

John tumbled out of the car and prostrated himself on the ground, kissing it enthusiastically. Dave made a face.

“Why don’t you slip it the tongue while you’re at it, dude?”

John sat up, blushing slightly. “Even that would be better than listening to more of your rapping.”

“Oh, come on. Low blow. You could’ve made fun of the monologues, hell, you could’ve went for SBaHJ. But you went for the raps.” Dave shook his head slowly. “You monster.”

John rolled his eyes. “You know, I liked you a lot better when I only knew you as an internet celebrity.” He stood up and dusted the dirt off his shorts. “Just kidding. I’m not being serious when I say any of that, you’re pretty cool.”

“I invented cool, Egbert. And the first rule of cool is that you don’t ever let people know you aren’t serious. Just follow my lead.” Dave put on his most deadpan expression. “Every night, I lie in bed and I imagine what it would be like to make out with the ground. It is my greatest fantasy.”

There was a long, awkward moment before he nodded. “Just like that. You’d never know I wasn’t serious, and that’s how you know I’m cool.”

“Dude, that’s not cool. That’s just weird!”

“It’s all in the irony. You can reject my lessons all you want, but someday, you’ll find yourself in a crisis. And you’ll be like, goddamn. I sure wish I’d listened to Dave when he taught me how to be cool. You’ll have lost all--”

“I’m going to cut this analogy short before it gets out of hand,” Rose interrupted. “I believe we have someone to meet up with?”
“Yeah.” Dirk looked up from his phone, which he had been busily tapping away at. “I told Jane where we are, she’s gonna meet us here in a few minutes.”

Jade clapped her hands together excitedly. “I can’t wait to meet her! Oh, also, can you have her bring along any supplies we might need? We’re a little low on bandages since Dave got shot, and it’s always good to have more food around.”

“Roger that.” Dirk typed something more.

They waited around for ten minutes, bantering back and forth and reveling in their newfound freedom. Dave had never realized how confining it could be in a car. But then again, he’d never spent nearly so much time in one. He climbed onto the roof of the car, looking out over the view that was only barely extended by his newfound height.

He could see a car coming down the street, and judging by how Dirk stood up straighter, it must have been Jane’s. It slowed to a stop, and a girl with short black hair and glasses hopped out. She scurried up to them.

“Hello, Dirk! It’s good to see you.” She had a trace of a Southern drawl, not overwhelming, but still present. “And to the rest of you, hello! I’m Jane. Who might you be?”

They went around with some brief introductions, but Jane seemed distracted. She bounced on the balls of her feet and glanced at Dirk every few seconds. Once she knew everyone’s name, she burst out: “Dirk, I’ve got a surprise for you!”

Dirk arched an eyebrow. “Oh, really. What could it possibly be?”

“Oh, shush, you. This is something you actually won’t have seen coming. I know your ways, and I made sure to keep it secret!” Jane dashed back to the car and flung the doors open. When she turned around, she smiled, and two more faces appeared behind her.

One was a girl. She looked as if she wouldn’t be out of place as a pinup model, with her flippy blonde hair and wide smile. The other was a boy, with tan skin and a ripped army jacket that gave off a vibe far different than his tiny frame. “Surprise!” the girl shouted.

Dirk’s jaw actually dropped. “How the hell did you guys get here?”

“You can’t have forgotten that I moved to America several years ago?” the boy teased.


The girl, Roxy, rolled her eyes. “Duhh, because you’re my friend. If I want anybody on my side during the apocalypse, it’s the dude with the sword, no matter how shit the sword may be.”

“Okay, first of all, my katana isn’t shit, it’s the shit. Second of all, are you insane?”

“We’re perfectly rational!” the boy chimed in. “I thought you would’ve been happier to see us, old chap.”

Dave snorted.

Dirk ignored him. “Of fucking course I’m glad to see you. I just don’t really know how to react to the fact that you’re risking your lives to be here. One guy with an anime sword isn’t going to do you much good in the long run. You would have been safer at home.”
Roxy went over and wrapped her arms around Dirk’s waist. She was much shorter than him, and she rested her head against his chest. “Dirky. You gotta shut up about that stuff, all right? We’re here to fight aliens with you, and it is going to be boss as hell, and that is that. No arguments!”

Dirk sighed. “You’re not going to give up, are you.”

“Nope! Forget about safety. There hasn’t been such thing as safety since fucking aliens landed here, in case you didn’t notice. Now do some introductions!” Roxy let go of Dirk and looked at John, Rose, Dave, and Jade. “I don’t know any of these guys yet.”

Jade did not hesitate to introduce herself. “Hi, I’m Jade! This is my cousin John.”

“I am Rose.”

Dave held up a halfhearted peace sign. ”Sup, I’m Dave.”

“Heyyy!” Roxy waved. “I’m Roxy.”

“And I’m Jake!” said the boy. He stepped up and gave each of them an enthusiastic handshake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all. I’m sure we’ll get into some great scraps against those alien buggers together.” He continued on to handshake the people he already knew.

“Now that we have more numbers and more information, we could begin to fight in a more direct manner,” Rose said thoughtfully. “Would anyone like to brainstorm with me?”

“I will,” said Dirk.

“Me too!” said Roxy and Jake.

Jane stifled a yawn. “I’d like to help out, but I’m no good at strategy. It’s getting late. I think I’ll turn in for the night.”

“Same,” said Dave. While these new people seemed nice, their presence brought the familiar prickle of fear in the back of his mind. He knew they weren’t going to do anything bad, but his irrational worry persisted, and the thought of spending more time in the company of these strangers made him want to scream. Besides, he had a lot to think about without adding battle plans.

He jumped into the car and took the back seat. While it was uncomfortable to sit in, it was the best place to lie down. As he reclined, he allowed himself to wonder.

What had he done to make Karkat hate him so much?

Would he ever see Karkat again?

And, most confusingly, why did he want to?

Chapter End Notes

Woah, 200 kudos? WHat???? WHAT

you’re all crazy
Chapter Summary

"I wonder if I tell them what I did last night
Whether or not I got caught, they just might
Wage war on you, therefore it's true
That I shot my general on my side of enemy lines"

Clear, twenty one pilots

Karkat’s face burned as he walked away from Dave. He could scarcely believe he had said all that.

He had turned away before Dave could respond. There was too much chance the human wouldn’t feel the same way. But, if they ever met again, Karkat could find out for sure. Maybe his rant had not been in vain.

For now, he had to focus on getting back to his group. He opened the Trollian application in his helmet. A flood of color awaited him. His friends had left walls of text and worry, most of the messages in jade green. He felt a little bad. But this trip had been necessary, no matter how unsatisfactory it turned out to be.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began trolling grimAuxiliatrix [GA] --

CG: HEY.

GA: Karkat!!

GA: Where Have you Been I Have Been So Worried
GA: Why Did You Not Inform Us Of Your Departure
GA: Why Did You Leave

CG: I’M SORRY.

CG: I GUESS I JUST NEEDED TIME TO CLEAR MY PAN.

GA: Why Did You Not Return Sooner

CG: I…

CG: SIGH. SO, YOU REMEMBER THAT HUMAN THAT I DIDN’T KILL?

GA: Yes

CG: WELL, TURNS OUT, HE’S HERE. I RAN INTO HIM.

CG: IT REALLY PISSED ME OFF WHEN I SAW HIM. I FIGURED HE’D DONE SOMETHING TO MY PAN, TO MAKE ME IFFY ABOUT KILLING. Y’KNOW. WE GOT IN A LITTLE FIGHT.
GA: Oh Karkat

GA: It Is Not His Fault

GA: It Is Just A Part Of Your Personality

GA: It Is Beyond Your Control, You Will Simply Have To Push Through It

CG: YEAH…

CG: MY PERSONALITY. THAT’S DEFINITELY IT. NOTHING ELSE.

GA: Did You Kill The Human

CG: NO.

CG: I, UH. ACTUALLY TALKED WITH IT. IT TURNS OUT THERE’S A TRANSLATION FEATURE IN THE HELMETS.

GA: What Did You Talk About

GA: Did You Learn Anything That Could Be Used Against Them

CG: NO.

CG: NOTHING.

CG: WE JUST TALKED ABOUT…

CG: UH, STUFF. IT WAS MOSTLY STUPID.

GA: I Would Not Expect Anything More

GA: I Had Hoped To Find Some Measure Of Intelligence Among Their Species, But Thus far I Have Been Disappointed

CG: ME TOO.

CG: HEY, WHERE ARE YOU, ANYWAY? I GOT A LITTLE TURNED AROUND.

GA: Let Me Come And Find You

CG: NO, I’VE GOT IT. JUST GIVE ME A GENERAL LOCATION.

GA: Are You Able To See A Large Building With A Flag Atop It

CG: UH…

CG: NO.

CG: WAIT, YES, I SEE IT.

GA: Good

GA: We Have Moved There, Sollux Found There To Be A Better Signal

GA: And It Is Easier To Defend
CG: HAS DEFENSE BECOME AN ISSUE?

GA: We Did Have A Small Encounter With An Angry Highblood Inquiring As To Why We Were Not Present On The Front Lines

CG: OH NO.

GA: Everything Is Okay Though

GA: He Was Easily Disposed Of

CG: OH.

CG: WELL, I SHOULD STILL GET BACK AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. I’M ON MY WAY.

GA: I Look Forward To Seeing You

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased trolling grimAuxiliatrix [GA] --

Karkat began walking down the street. A ways away was a tall building, a red and white flag perched on its roof. Wait. There was blue in the flag, too. Karkat had to admit, it was more attractive than the ever-present logos of the Condesce.

It seemed closer than it actually was, and it took a while of walking before he was able to figure out the correct route. When he did, he saw Kanaya standing at the foot of the building. Her face lit up when she saw him.

“Karkat!”

It was a mark of Karkat’s affection for Kanaya that he did not stiffen as she threw her arms around him. Instead, he relaxed into the hug, even returning it. “I can’t leave you alone for one minute?”

“Not if it involves sneaking away from your friends,” said Kanaya. She pulled back and gave him a stern look. “Now, what in the world compelled you to do that?”

“I, uh…” Karkat searched for an excuse. “I just got a little freaked out over my glance nuggets changing.”

Over Trollian, he had taken care to make it sound like he hadn’t gone looking for Dave. That would engender an entirely different conversation, and one he did not want to participate in, not yet. She would wonder why he’d gotten so invested in pursuing one human, and then...

Then there was the whole half-human thing. Dave wasn’t alien, not really, because Karkat was partly his species. Karkat didn’t even know what to think. Did the fact that he was almost the same as Dave make his feelings okay? Was it fucked up to wonder that? God, he didn’t like having the conversation with himself, much less his moirail.

“Next time, you must tell me where you are going,” Kanaya fretted. “What if that human had been armed?”

Dave had been armed, but he had never attempted to lash out at Karkat.


“It is all right. You know that I am only scolding you because I care.” Kanaya patted his cheek before taking his prong and leading him into the building.
The inside was semi-familiar to Karkat. It seemed like a sort of communal hivestem. There was a receptionist’s counter, an elevator towards the back, and a lobby arrayed with comfortable-looking sofas.

Their squadron was spread out across the lobby. Nepeta was sitting on the counter, Eridan lounging behind it. Vriska and Terezi were playing some type of card game in the corner. Sollux was buried deep in the cushions of a plush couch, still typing away at his palmhusk. Karkat walked up to him.

“You look like shit. Have you slept at all?”

Sollux shook his head almost imperceptibly. His fingers continued flying across the screen. Karkat’s brow furrowed. “Dude, you need to take a break. Gamzee and Tavros can wait.”

“I already cracked the firewallth for the helmetth,” Sollux said, his voice hoarse. “Latht night, you mithed it. We can talkt to whoever the hell we want now. Or, almotht anybody. We thould be able to meet up with Tavroth and Gamzee thoon.”

Karkat started to ask one question, but it changed into another mid-sentence. “Then why are you--oh. Oh, right.”

“Yeah. The firewallth around the thip itthelf are way thtronger than the oneth around the helmetth. It’th… It’th gonna be a while before we can talk to FF freely.” Sollux sighed. “And Eridan won’t thtop bugging me about it. Ath if he’th the only one who careth about her.”

Nepeta leaped onto the couch beside Sollux, jolting his fingers from their calculated typing position. He hissed.

“Oh, come on, Sollux!” she said. “You know she’d want you to take a break. If you keep going like this, you’ll just end up making a mistake beclaws you’re tired.”

“I’ve done more on leth thleep,” Sollux muttered. “Kindly hop off my bulge.”

“You’re being an idiot,” Karkat said. He snatched the palmhusk from Sollux’s hands. It took a second for the yellow-blood to register this, but when he did, he lunged for it.

“Give it back, athhole!” Karkat shoved him away.

“Please!” Kanaya’s voice cut through their scuffle. They both froze. “Sollux, while Karkat may be overzealous, his reason is sound. You must rest. Feferi will still be there when you wake up. She is safe. You have all the time in the world to get to her.”

There was the sound of shattering glass, and a jet of light cut through the air to burn through the couch, mere inches from where Nepeta sat. Her glance nuggets widened. “Get down!”

Karkat, Kanaya, and Sollux all ducked.

More shots erupted through the window. Almost all of the glass had been blown away, and whoever
was shooting seemed to realize it.

“Guys?” Terezi yelled. “What’s going on?”

A troll leapt through the window, blaster raised. “You’re committing treason!” he shouted. His voice quavered slightly. “My leader said that you’re not helping us fight at all, and that’s not allowed! You have the choice to either join the fight or be culled!”

Eridan stood up from behind the counter, scowling. “What the hell do you think you’re doin’? My squad does whatever I dictate them to, and right now, we just so happen to be takin’ a break. Is that such a fuckin’ problem?”

Karkat peeked out around the counter. The enemy troll was trembling under Eridan’s gaze, and he had reason to, judging by the maroon symbol on his chest. The difference between their castes was enormous.

“Oh,” he stammered. “I mean no disrespect, sir, but I’m under strict orders from my leader. I think I’m supposed to listen to him before you.”

“And what’s his issue with us?”

The maroon-blood lowered his blaster slightly. “Well, the fact that you aren’t fighting is making him angry, and, well… Someone said they saw a mutant-blood walking with you, sir.”

Karkat froze.

Eridan’s face did not slip. Instead, he sneered. “Whoever said that is lyin’ scum. We ain’t got any mutants here. In fact, we ain’t even got anythin’ as low as you.”

“Of course,” Eridan said casually. “Look as much as you want. You won’t find shit, unless you’re lookin’ in your own veins.”

Damn. Karkat honestly wasn’t sure if Eridan was acting. He could be extremely casteist at times, and now could just be another instance of his bad qualities resurfacing.

But it had to be an act. Otherwise, Eridan wouldn’t let that troll see their blood colors. The violet-blood was just bluffing about that. Right?

Oh.

Eridan didn’t have to act. He could let the troll see their blood all he wanted!

From Karkat’s position behind the counter, he was invisible to the enemy. And with Nepeta present, they seemed like a complete team. He would be safe if he stayed hidden!

Karkat crouched down as low as he could.

“All right,” said the lowblood. There came the sound of footsteps, and Nepeta hissed.

“It’s only a tiny cut,” Terezi muttered. “Don’t be such a wrigg— ow, fuck! You didn’t have to go that deep!”
“Sorry, miss,” the lowblood apologized.

“Don’t you try that on me,” Vriska warned. “I will rip your nugbone off.”

The only sound she let out was a sharp breath. The troll must have gone easier on her.

Sollux was next, then Kanaya. It probably hurt Karkat more than Kanaya to hear her in pain, but he had to stay quiet. He couldn’t allow himself to be discovered.

“And, um, now I have to see your blood,” said the enemy troll, his voice trailing off into a mumble. Karkat glanced up to see Eridan scowl.

“This should amount to some sort of fuckin’ insubordination.”

But he walked around the counter all the same. His pride may have been a powerful thing, but Karkat knew he wouldn’t place it over the life of a friend.

“I’m so very sorry,” the lowblood said. His footsteps seemed to be getting further away. “I’ll tell my leader there’s nothing here, we won’t be bothering you again. I apologize for my disrespect.”

Glass crunched, and then there was silence.

“He’s gone,” Eridan said under his breath. “You can come out now.”

“Holy shit,” Karkat said as he stood up. “Nepeta, I am so fucking glad you exist.”

“Me too,” said Nepeta. She looked troubled. “I think that was one of the people from the group that bothered us before. Why are they so determined to get to us?”

“It all dependth on if thomebody really thaw Karkat,” said Sollux. “If they got a good look at hith blood, they won’t give up anytime thoon. Not fighting ith one thing. But harboring a mutant? In their panth, they’ve got reathon to attack uth.”

Karkat winced. “I’m sorry for putting you guys through this shit.”

Kanaya was at his side in an instant. She quickly papped him on the cheek. “Shh. You are our friend, Karkat, we would not let anything hurt you.”

“Yeah, not unless you did something really shitty,” Vriska chimed in. Kanaya glared at her.

“We will not let anything hurt you, no matter what happens.”

“All the same, we might want to relocate,” said Terezi. “We’re attracting too much attention here. I say we move on to the next city.”

Karkat had been thinking the same thing, but in a completely different way.

It obviously wasn’t safe for him to stay with his friends anymore. Someone had seen his blood, and it was only a matter of time before they were all killed. He should leave while he still had the chance.

Running away from his friends was inevitable. He should have realized that earlier. Maybe if he had, he could be trying to make a difference by rebelling with Dave. the thought sent a shiver down his posture pole.

Rebellion.
It was a strangely enticing idea. Already, he was imagining what it would be like: he could live
without the fear of culling, and hide himself away with people who wouldn’t be endangered by his
very existence. He could pursue a kismesistude with Dave, if he wanted to. It would be a fulfilling
experience.

But quadrants wouldn’t be his primary reason, obviously. He had some self-respect.

“Agreed,” said Eridan. “We should be able to find a pod lyin’ around somewhere, that’ll carry us
faster than a human machine.”

Karkat couldn’t go with Dave, anyway. Dave was gone, and there was no way to contact him. It
wasn’t as if he’d have Trollian…

Wait.

In the car with Dave, Karkat had recognized the symbol stamped on the back of his helmet. It was
Nepeta’s. It could have been a coincidence, of course. There were sure to be more people in the
army with Nepeta’s symbol, and therefore have it on a helmet. But when he tried the helmet on and
read through the stored messages, he had found it to be the genuine article.

Now that Sollux had cracked the firewalls around Trollian…

He could message Nepeta’s helmet, which was not currently in her possession. He could find Dave.
Rebellion was suddenly an option, and with that freedom, Karkat’s pan instantly set to planning.

“Karkat?”

Karkat blinked. “Uh, what?”

Eridan huffed. “You could at least listen to us tryin’ to save your ass. We’re movin’ on to the next
city. You comin’?”

“Of course.” Karkat jumped up to follow his team members. As he walked, he opened Trollian.

*Here goes nothing.*

-- carcinoGenetecist [CG] began trolling arsenicCatnip [AC] --

CG: HELLO?

CG: GOD, I HOPE YOU’RE SMART ENOUGH TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO TRANSLATE
THIS.

CG: I DON’T USUALLY ASK FAVORS. BUT JUST THIS ONCE, I’M ASKING YOU TO
TAKE A PAUSE FROM BEING AN UGLY DOUCHE LONG ENOUGH TO TALK WITH
ME A MINUTE.

AC: Hmm… I’m afraid that isn’t possible. Being an ugly douche takes a certain amount of
dedication, you see, and I cannot afford to be distracted.

AC: The fate of millions lies with my ability to be a douche. It is the one constant they can always
depend on.

CG: YOU AREN’T DAVE.
AC: No, I am not.

CG: WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU.

AC: I am an ugly douche, apparently.

CG: NO. I MEAN, WHAT’S YOUR STUPID HUMAN NAME.

AC: Oh, that. It’s Rose.

CG: HOW DID YOU GET THIS HELMET.

AC: Relax. I’m Dave’s friend. Would you like me to put him on?

CG: PLEASE.

AC: Give me a moment.

AC: sup

CG: DAVE?

AC: thats me

AC: whos this

CG: IT’S KARKAT. I NEED YOUR HELP.

AC: oh hi

AC: im surprised you still want anything to do with me but hey im not one to turn a bro down

AC: glad to talk to you again

AC: what do you need

CG: I NEED YOU TO…

CG: UGH. I’M GOING TO SOUND LIKE SUCH A HYPOCRITE SAYING THIS.

CG: I NEED YOU TO TELL ME WHERE YOU ARE, AND THEN…

CG: TAKE ME WITH YOU.

AC: holy shit

AC: are you saying you’re joining us

CG: I GUESS.

CG: IRONICALLY ENOUGH, IT’LL BE SAFER FOR EVERYONE IF I JUST GIVE UP AND REBEL.

AC: rebellion is the opposite of giving up dude

AC: its like
AC: not giving up

CG: HOLY SHIT.

CG: THAT IS QUITE POSSIBLY THE MOST ELOQUENT THING I’VE EVER HEARD.

CG: STUPIDITY TRULY IS AN ART.

AC: shut up

CG: NO.

AC: do you want to come with us or not

CG: …

CG: YEAH. WHERE ARE YOU?

AC: kansas

CG: WHERE THE FUCK IS THAT.

AC: approximately a fuckton of units of measurement away from you

CG: GOD DAMNIT.

CG: YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE TO GIVE ME DIRECTIONS.

AC: no prob im the pro at directions

AC: by which i mean i suck at directions but ill try not to land you in the middle of nowhere

CG: UGH. WHATEVER. I’M GOING TO TRY AND SNEAK AWAY FROM MY FRIENDS, I’LL TELL YOU WHEN I’M READY.

AC: see ya

AC: oh also next time just contact me directly my username its turntechGodhead

AC: wait how did you even know how to contact this helmet

CG: IT BELONGED TO ONE OF MY FRIENDS.

AC: …

AC: youre friends with the cat girl?

CG: HOW DO YOU KNOW NEPETA?

AC: hahaha oh man weve got a lot to talk about

AC: catch you later dude

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased trolling arsenicCatnip [AC] --

“Okay, we found one, yeah, but how are we supposed to get it?” Terezi complained.
“We just take it from whoever’s usin’ it,” said Eridan, his words more confident than his face. “Simple.”

“Couldn’t that get uth in trouble?” Sollux asked. “We don’t even know how the podth work. Why do thome people have them and not othert?”

“It could be a reward system. If a squadron does well in battle, they receive a pod,” Kanaya mused. “Or it could be random. Let us pray for the latter. The former would imply a higher degree of surveillance over us than we previously believed.”

Karkat had lost the subject of conversation while he was messaging Dave. “Wait, what’s going on?”

Vriska rolled her eyes and pointed down the street. “See that?”

Floating around was an Imperial pod, bright red and so very desirable.

“We need that to get away from here,” said Vriska. “So we’ve got to steal it from whoever’s using it.”

“I don’t see why we’re planning, then,” Karkat frowned. “There’s only one way to steal something in active use. You shoot until it’s yours.”

Eridan sighed. “I’d prefer a less risky way, but I think that’s what we’ve gotta do.”

The team looked at each other and nodded. Karkat pulled out his blaster, and they began to advance towards the pod.

Up close, it seemed small. The human vehicle they had traveled in was actually larger. But this would take them faster, and make them less suspicious. They positioned themselves beneath it. Eridan held up three fingers.


He fired up into the belly of the pod. It lurched to the side, then righted itself. Karkat shot into the hole Eridan had made, widening it and hopefully injuring someone within. It was only seconds before the return fire came.

The returning beams came from a different angle. One glanced the top of Karkat’s helmet, and he could feel it burning past. He sent out a silent thanks to whoever had made the helmets blaster-proof. He looked up to see where the shot had come from.

Fuck, the enemies were firing from the roof of the pod. They must have realized it would be useless staying within, where they could be hit by any of the shots coming from below.

Eridan’s team would be safe if they stayed beneath the pod… Probably. Karkat ducked back underneath it.

“They’re on the roof,” he shouted. “If we can get the hole big enough to get in, we can shake them off.”

Vriska responded by firing rapidly at the hole. It smoked and recoiled, morphing into something large enough to fit a troll. Without further prompting, she leapt up and climbed inside. There was a bang, and the ship wobbled again, dipping dangerously low over the heads of the team below.

“Get in here, somebody!” Vriska called. “Quick!”
Karkat climbed up through the hole. When he saw who was piloting, he blanched.

“Wait, these things need helmsman? I thought anyone could pilot them!”

“Ships with pilots go faster,” Vriska said. “That’s why we wanted one of these. Now get in and help me!”

Sollux jumped up behind Karkat, and stumbled.

A pair of goggles were clamped over the pilot’s glance nuggets, and over his prongs were a pair of gloves. He waved his arm to the side, and the pod swung around. He to be seemed unaware of his surroundings.

“You’re not making me do that,” Sollux whispered. “I won’t.”

Vriska rolled her glance nuggets. “Chill out. We can just make this one do whatever we want.” She held up a prong to her temple, and the yellow-blood straightened. “Mind control. It’s pretty handy.”

Karkat aimed his blaster up to the roof and fired up. Sollux joined him until they burned a hole through it, the surprised faces of the enemies looking down through it.

Eridan joined them inside. The two teams shot back and forth at each other until the air was thick with hot beams of light. Terezi, Nepeta, and Kanaya were the last to climb in, and as they did, the tide turned in their favor. The enemy fire faltered.

“Keep going!” Eridan ordered. “We’re almost there!”

The pilot spun the pod in a circle. Karkat stumbled, but did not cease fire. The pod began to shake from side to side, the floor tilting beneath Karkat’s nubs. There came a shriek from above.

Karkat glanced out the window. In a split second, a troll flashed by. From heaven to Earth, its body hit the ground and crumpled. Maroon blood pooled around its nugbone. Karkat squinted. Though broken, its face seemed familiar…

"Fuck!"

He’d been hit. He clutched at his left side. It was a shallow wound, but red blood was already beginning to appear. Kanaya grabbed him by the arm and shoved him closer to the window, where he was blockd from view by his companions. Had the other team seen?

A hysterical grin crossed Karkat’s face. That maroon-blood was the same one who had attacked their settlement. They knew Karkat was a mutant, even if they hadn’t seen his blood yet.

"Mutant!” someone screamed.

Well. Now they had confirmation.

Terezi propped a nub against the wall, pushed, and jumped up to grab onto the edge of the hole in the roof. She winced as the superheated metal burned her skin, but did not let go. She shot wildly as she climbed, and dragged herself onto the roof. Her teammates within the pod had her back. Every time an enemy aimed at her, that troll would suddenly find themself being shot at.

Terezi kept firing until all the opponents dropped.

Karkat sighed. It was half relief, half anticipation. They had a pod. It was half-destroyed, sure, but fully functional. Now came the difficult part.
He had been planning to steal the pod and hightail it, but the requirement of a helmsman made things more difficult. Karkat hoped the yellow-blood was out of it enough to listen to his commands. He just needed to get his friends out.

“Wait!” he blurted. “This pod has tons of room. We could hold a perigee’s worth of supplies in here. Let’s go back to that building and grab stuff, then we can go.”

“Should we? In case you hadn’t noticed, this was a pretty big scene,” Terezi frowned. “Do we want to give other squadrons enough time to find us?”

“It’s fine,” said Eridan. “He’s right. We’re going to keep fighting the humans, obviously, but we need to think about hiding from violent squadrons now, too. That means we won’t be able to make supply runs as often. We should get as much as we can now.”

Terezi nodded. “Okay. Vriska, bring us back!”

Vriska narrowed her eyes, and the pilot’s gloved prongs shifted. The pod moved along with them, and began to speed down the road in the direction they had come.

They halted in front of the building. One by one, Karkat’s friends hopped out of the pod. He held his breath. Three, two, one, and he was alone.

“Okay, uh, helmsman. Can you take me somewhere?” he whispered.

“Affirmative,” the pilot mumbled.

Either the piloting had worn away at the lowblood’s pan, which was likely, or he was unaware that Karkat was a mutant. Thank god.

“Okay, I need you to take me to… Kansas,” Karkat said, his brow furrowing. He would have to ask Dave for more specific directions.

“Destination accepted.” The pod’s engine revved, and it began to slowly move forward, accelerating with every foot. Karkat tore his glance nuggets away from the window. His friends had gone inside. They didn’t notice he was gone, and he was glad. It would have been harder if they had come back for him.

A silhouette flickered at the door. It opened, and Kanaya appeared. Shit. She had noticed his absence.

Karkat had just enough time to glimpse her shocked face before the pod was speeding away.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured.

Now his friends would have to go through the trouble of getting another pod. They may not have had a mutant with them anymore, but they were still acting in a way far opposed to how Alternian soldiers should. With every battle against their allies, they were painting the target across their backs a darker shade.

“Keep flying,” Karkat ordered the pilot. “Don’t stop until we reach Kansas. I’ll give you further instructions then.”

“Affirmative,” said the helmsman.

There was a bench that went around the interior of the pod. Karkat sat down on it and tried not to
feel so guilty. It didn’t work.

He needed a distraction. He stood up again, looking around for something else to do.

There. There were cabinets close to the ceiling, above the bench. He opened one, and his jaw dropped.

This pod had sopor. Real, honest-to-god sopor slime. It quivered, thick and green, in a stack of containers.

That settled it. He didn’t have a recuperacoon, but even a drop of slime would give him a better sleep than he’d had in weeks. Karkat popped the lid off a container and slathered the slime across his prongs, going all the way up his arm. He could already feel the drowsiness falling over him. The stuff was potent after going without it so long.

He barely had the energy to recap the container and slide it back onto the shelf before he collapsed onto the bench.

Falling asleep easily was a nice change. For once, he didn’t have to worry or feel guilty about his friends, he didn’t have to think about the disgusting situation that was Dave.

Karkat drifted off to sleep in peace.
Dave had thought Karkat was gone for good.

Getting a message from the troll was surprising on so many levels. Why did Karkat forgive Dave for… whatever Dave had done to enrage him? How did he know how to contact the Resistance? Why was he joining them?

None of it really mattered, though. Dave was just glad Karkat was on their team. It was a weird sort of feeling, one without explanation, but he just rolled with it. There was too much going on to keep dwelling on his strange attachment to the troll.

“It appears that the Alternian ship is following roughly the same track as us,” said Rose, eyes boring into the screen of a laptop. “Ugh. If only it had continued on to the West Coast… We will have to stay a step ahead of it. It’s quite nice not having to avoid the invaders anymore, and I would prefer to stay in a place where there are none.”

Jade frowned. “Why didn’t they keep going West? You don’t think they could be following us?”

Rose shook her head. “No. For now, we are only eight young humans, and I am sure they would think we pose no threat to them. They do not know we exist. But that will change soon enough…”

Roxy thumped her legs against the hood of the car where she sat. “Does that mean we’re gonna start fighting? How? They’re way stronger than us.”

“That doesn’t matter!” said Jade. She climbed up from the ground to sit next to Roxy. “While their materials are more durable than ours, and their weapons are stronger, they can still be beaten. I actually shot down one of those pods flying around!”

Roxy raised her eyebrows. “For real? Dang.”

“Yeah.” Jade smiled. “It takes a few shots to get through the windshield, but take out the pilot, and it’ll drop! Not so hopeless after all.”

“What would we do without our team optimist?” said Rose, not looking up from her computer. “Roxy, Dirk tells me you are quite adept at coding. I must confess a profound ignorance to the subject. If you would please assist me? I’m attempting to transfer the translation software to this computer, so we don’t always have to be passing the helmet back and forth.”

“Sure!” Roxy slipped down from the car and sat on the ground beside Rose. “Pass ‘er over.” Rose handed the computer to Roxy, who began to read through what Rose had written. “Hmm… Who’s
“Me,” said Dave. He had been quietly sitting beside John, watching and listening to the group converse. The helmet was tucked under his arm. Before giving it to Roxy, he hesitated. “I kinda forgot to mention something from last night.”

Rose looked up. “Something from Alternian society?” The previous night, Dave had told her everything that Karkat had said. She had been fascinated, and refused to cease drilling Dave for information until late into the night.

“Nah. Something else. Karkat…” Dave paused. “He’s coming to join us. Hope that’s cool with everybody.”

Jake smiled widely. “The troll you told us all about? That sounds splendid! It’ll be quite the adventure to have an honest-to-goodness alien for a pal.”

“Wait,” said John, holding up a hand. “The last time we saw him, he screamed in your face, hit you, and ran away. Why is he coming back?”

Dave shrugged. “He’s got freaky blood, remember? He said it wasn’t safe to stay with his friends, so he probably got found out. No biggie.”

John frowned. “It seems kind of weird, though…”

“It really isn’t. You’d get it if you’d heard his side of the story.”

“I would agree with John,” said Dirk, “if I didn’t know Karkat. With any other troll, I’d be all up in its face with a sword. But Karkat’s legit, we can trust him. Even as a little kid, he wouldn’t hurt a fly, and no matter how bad his planet fucked him up, there’s no way he’d sell us out to his ruler or anything.”

John giggled. “It’s so cool that you knew Karkat!”

“Yes, it is. It is also fortunate. It gives us much more reason to trust him. Dave’s word seems awfully little to go on,” said Rose. She smirked at Dave. “You did warm up to him quite easily.”

Dave ignored her. “So, yeah. I’m giving Karkat directions right now. He’s going to meet us here in about twenty minutes, if he is where I think he is.” He plonked the helmet down over his eyes and began to message Karkat.

-- arsenicCatnip [AC] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

AC: nevermind dont contact me at turntechGodhead
AC: i saw you try and damn
AC: that was
AC: strange
AC: i have no idea how to read your language like honestly what the fuck

CG: FOR THE RECORD, YOUR LANGUAGE IS JUST AS INDECIPHERABLE.
AC: were trying to adapt this translation software to our earth tech so it can be easier
CG: HA.
CG: DID YOU SEE, THAT WAS ME LAUGHING.
CG: HAHAHAHA.
CG: YOU CAN'T JUST FUCKING DO THAT. FOR ONE THING, OUR HARDWARE IS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT. HAVE YOU EVER EVEN SEEN THE INTERIOR OF A HUSKTOP?
AC: what the fuck is a husktop
AC: is that like a laptop only made out of corn husks or something
CG: WHAT THE FUCK IS A CORN.
CG: DO YOU SEE WHAT I MEAN? THERE’S TOO MUCH DIFFERENCE. YOU CAN’T JUST TAKE A PROGRAM FROM A DIFFERENT GALAXY AND GO, “WOW! LOOK AT WHAT A FUCKING BRILLIANT HAXXOR BITCH I AM. I JUST SOMEHOW MADE THIS ALIEN SHIT WORK, WHICH IS SOMETHING I AM ABLE TO DO BECAUSE REASONS.”
AC: it doesn’t actually seem that different though
AC: i mean you’ve got an equivalent of pesterchum
AC: our haxxor bitch is doing pretty well trying to adapt it i think shell be able to do it
AC: the power of reasons is on her side
CG: WHOOP DE FUCKING DO. HOW ABOUT I GO AND JUMP OFF THE NEAREST CLIFF, MAYBE “REASONS” WILL GRANT ME THE ABILITY TO FLY.
AC: good thing i adapted a super robot from your planet that i can use to catch you
CG: ANY ROBOTS FROM MY PLANET WOULD ONLY SERVE AS TO MAKE SURE THE PERSON DIED.
AC: oh right i forgot you live on violence planet
AC: see this is why you need robots to be adapted from earth
CG: GOOD GOD, DO YOU EVER SHUT UP?
CG: REMIND ME WHY I’M JOINING THIS CLUSTERFUCK OF WRITHING IDIOTS.
AC: that sounded a little wrong man
AC: i mean i can respect a dude having a deep yearning for this sweet ass but at least get me a drink before you try to start an orgy
AC: (aj plz)
CG: WHAT.
CG: ARE YOU TRYING TO FLIRT WITH ME.
AC: oh my god
AC: okay see here on earth theres this concept called irony

AC: its a little difficult to understand but ill give you a free tip

AC: the most important part of being cool is creating a layer of sarcasm and insincerity so thick that nobody can ever be sure what youre really talking about

AC: youve got to act genuine enough that what you say might be the truth but also have enough of a reputation so people doubt you

CG: THAT DOESN’T ANSWER MY QUESTION AT ALL.

AC: exactly

AC: anyway youre near wichita right

CG: UM. I THINK SO?

AC: okay cool youre like fifteen minutes away were in park city

AC: put it in your gps or whatever

CG: I DON’T KNOW WHAT A GPS IS, IDIOT.

AC: seriously

AC: god we need to adapt technology faster how the hell do you survive without gps

CG: I’M GOING TO BE A RESPONSIBLE, MATURE PERSON AND IGNORE YOUR CULTURAL INSENSITIVITY IN FAVOR OF DRIVING SAFELY.

CG: (THAT’S IRONIC BECAUSE I’M NOT EVEN THE ONE DRIVING THIS THING).

AC: hey youre getting it

AC: thats only like level one irony though youve gotta step it up

AC: wait i thought you had to sneak away from your friends whos driving

CG: SOME SORRY DOUCHE FROM ANOTHER SQUADRON. HE’S OUT OF IT ENOUGH TO TAKE ORDERS FROM ME, SO HE’S PROBABLY GOT SOME KIND OF PILOTING-INDUCED PAN DAMAGE. BUT WHATEVER. A RIDE IS A RIDE, EVEN IF IT’S FAULTY.

AC: what does pan mean

CG: THE PLACE WHERE YOU DO ALL YOUR THINKING. QUITE CLEARLY, YOU HAVEN’T GOT ONE.

AC: oh like a brain then

AC: or mind or whatever

AC: piloting can give you brain damage man what the fuck

AC: jesus christ what the fuck is your planet even
CG: YOU JUST CAN’T STOP USING FOREIGN TERMS, CAN YOU.
AC: what
AC: oh hahaha
AC: hey karkat do you have a moment to talk about our lord and savior jesus christ
CG: GOODBYE.
CG: ACTUALLY, NO, YOU DON’T EVEN DESERVE A GOODBYE. FUCK YOU.
-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased trolling arsenicCatnip [AC] --

“Karkat’s on his way,” Dave announced. No one said anything, but Dave knew they had heard. Roxy’s fingers tapped away at her keyboard.

They waited quietly for another twenty minutes.

The first indication of the pod drawing near was the sound of the engine whirring. Jade sat up. “Dave, tell me that’s Karkat.”

Dave turned. The pod was moving down the street, clearly headed straight for them. He squinted. Behind the windshield, there were two figures visible. One appeared to be sitting, the other standing. He couldn’t make them out.

“Dunno. Probably. We’ll find out in a moment.”

The pod stopped before them, and a hatch swung out from the bottom. The troll that lept out was thin and agile, rather short, with a grey symbol stamped on his chest. Karkat.

Karkat pushed the button on the side of his helmet. “Hey, asshole. Nice job giving me directions. I was floundering around this city for ages before I managed to find you, and I was only able to because of the stench.”

“Good to see you, too,” Dave responded. He turned to the others. “Everybody, this is Karkat. Karkat, everybody.”

“Wow. It sure is a good thing I can refer to you collectively as ‘everybody,’” Karkat said sarcastically. “It would have been a pain to memorize all those stupid alien names.”

“Damn, cool the snark.” Dave pointed to Rose. “That’s Rose, and John, Jade, Dirk, Roxy, Jane, and Jake.”

“That’s too many names. I’ll just refer to you all as assholes one through eight.”

“What’s he saying?” Jane said curiously.

Dave raised his eyebrows. “He’s, uh, saying it’s a pleasure to meet you. Yeah.”

“What did Asshole Six say?” Karkat demanded. He paused. “Fuck, we really do need more translators.”

“Yes, we do. But I think our main objective is kicking ass.” Dave sat down next to Rose, and patted the ground for Karkat to do the same. The troll plopped down beside him, eyeing Rose suspiciously.
“What is our plan?”

Dave shrugged. “We find some pods, shoot ‘em down, find some trolls, shoot ‘em down.”

Karkat swallowed. “Uh, okay. How are you going to shoot a pod down?”

“She already did,” said Dave, pointing at Jade. “Just need to aim for the pilot.”

“Right.” Karkat went quiet. “God, this feels fucked up.”

“What, betraying your race?”

Karkat scowled. “That’s not helping, bulgemuncher. I don’t… I don’t like killing at all. But killing members of my own species is even worse.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want,” said Dave, a surprising note of gentleness in his tone. “You can leave that part to us.”

Karkat almost smiled, a grim expression. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“May I have a turn with the helmet?” said Rose. “I would like to discuss strategy with our Alternian friend here.”

Dave nodded. “Sure.” He slipped it off and gave it to her. She immediately put it on and began a dialogue with Karkat, both of them speaking rapidly.

It was interesting to hear Karkat speak with no translation. With the helmet on, Dave could hear the troll’s words, but usually focused on their meaning. This was different. Like this, all he could hear were the guttural noises, the chirps and hisses, the growls that somehow, in another world, equated to speech.

After a while of this, Rose addressed Dave. “All right. I think we have a viable plan. We can move out now, if we all agree, and begin the fight.”

“Boy, how exciting!” Jake chirped. “I’ll get my guns.” He scurried off to the car. Jade followed, presumably to retrieve her rifle. John, Jane, and Roxy went with them.

Dave and Dirk stayed behind. They locked eyes for a moment, both very aware of the swords lying next to them. They kept their weapons on them at all times. Rose, too, had her needles tucked into her skirt.

If they were ever caught unawares, they would have means to defend themselves.

“Ready!” said Jade, her gun beneath her arm. “Where are we going?”

Rose gave the helmet to Dave. At some point, he had become the translator’s default carrier.

“Karkat, where are we headed?” he asked.

“There should be a few squadrons heading into the city,” Karkat murmured. His eyes were not focused on Dave, but on his visor, reading a map or something similar. “We can intercept them. I think you all can fit in the pod with me.” He turned and walked back towards his vehicle.

“Hey, I forgot we’d have that on our side now,” said Dave appreciatively. “That’ll give us a lot more firepower.”
“I’ll move the supplies,” said Roxy. “If we’re going to be taking the pod from now on, we should have our stuff with it.” She ducked back into the car and came out with an armful of cans. “Everybody pitch in!”

Karkat’s head poked out of the pod. “Are you fuckers coming?” he yelled.

“Just a minute!” Dave called back. He went and grabbed a few medical kits, as well as a stack of canned food. He went over and gave them to Karkat before going to get another round.

When they were finished, the interior of the pod was much fuller, and Karkat was much grumpier. “Took you long enough. Can we just get going?”

“Yes, we can.” Dave sat down on the pod’s wraparound bench and took in the scenery. The inside of the pod was mostly white, with a few accents in grey and black. There was not a trace of the bright red that coated the exterior. “Hey, Karkat? If red’s so bad, as a blood color, I mean, why is all your stuff red?”

Karkat shrugged. “I don’t know. The Condesce has a fucked-up sense of humor, I guess.”

“Mmm.” Dave eyed the pilot. “So, what’s up with that guy?”

Karkat glanced over and winced. The troll seated at the helm was staring into space, or he seemed to be. His eyes were covered with a thick pair of goggles, and the rest of his body was similarly concealed with equipment. Gloves, a suit of some kind. Were those… wires?

Dave stood up, and Karkat twitched. “Don’t.”

But Dave had already turned the pilot to face them. The troll’s lips were parted slightly, his expression vacant. Dave looked closer. The skin around the goggles was scarred, as if they had been welded into the troll’s face. There were traces of yellow around his eyes and mouth. Blood?

Dave lifted one of the troll’s arms experimentally. The ship lurched, and he quickly paused. The pilot was limp, and seemed unable to move for himself, so Dave slowly lowered his arm. As he did so, he took a closer look at the suit. It was laced with yellow ridges, flowing from top to bottom. Cables connected the ends of the sleeves and legs to the dashboard. On the troll’s back, a knot of wires held him to his seat.

“Pan damage?” Dave questioned.

“Yeah,” said Karkat. He was determinedly not looking at the pilot. “Yellowbloods have these powers called psionics. It’s like psychic energy. Our ships run on them, but it’s… Most helmsman are never released, and they would never make it if they were. Pan dead, the lot of them. They’re just empty bodies stuffed with tech.”

“Damn.” Dave sat back down. “I am never, ever going to your planet.”

“It’s a good thing you don’t have to.” Karkat addressed the helmsman. “Take us to the edge of the city. If you see another pod, open fire.”

“Affirmative,” the troll responded. Dave winced.

“That’s creepy.”

“Get used to it,” said Karkat.
Most of the others had been packing up the pod, or exploring it. But Rose lingered nearby, interest clear in her expression. She was obviously wondering what they were talking about.

Dave gave the helmet to her before she could ask. She sat down next to them, turning to Karkat. Karkat hesitated to begin speaking, but after a while, they seemed to have a good conversation going.

Dave stood up. It was no use hanging around for a conversation he couldn’t understand. Instead, he sought out Roxy.

Roxy, he discovered, was sitting in a closet. The laptop was in her hands, and she was nibbling at a cracker as she typed.

“You got any more of those?” Dave asked.

Roxy passed him a box. “Here. Sorry for chomping into the supplies, but it’s been ages since I’ve eaten.”

“S’cool. How’s the coding going?”

Roxy let Dave look over her shoulder. The screen was filled with letters, some familiar, some not. The two languages of English and Alternian were one matter, but when put together into the language of code? They were indecipherable.

“How do you understand all this stuff?” Dave said, sitting down. “Don’t you need a translation?”

“Nah. I just recognize what letter combos do what.” Roxy swallowed the last of her cracker and increased her typing speed. “I should be done with this in a couple days, if I’m lucky.”

“Damn.” Dave considered this. “So, are you, like, a genius or something?”

Roxy shrugged. “I don’t like to put labels on myself, but I’m probably something like that.”

“You’re the first person I’ve ever met who can code in a different language.”

Roxy laughed. “I’ve got that going for me.”

She took another look at her screen, the paused, and snapped the laptop shut. “I’m gonna take a break for a little while. I need food and sleep.”

Dave looked around. “Where are the rest of the supplies?”

Roxy pointed up. “Some off the stuff is on shelves up there. Can you grab me a can of something good? No tuna.”

“Hell no. College students eat tuna, not genius hackers who’re helping to save the world.” Dave stood up and examined the shelf. There were several stacks of cans, as well as rolls of toilet paper and boxes of ammunition. “How ‘bout peaches?”

“Fine with me.”

Dave tossed her down the can. “Do we have a can opener?”

“Yeah, somewhere. I don’t need one for this, though.” Roxy curled up the tab on the can’s lid and snapped it open. Once the seal broke, the sweet smell of fruit broke through. She tipped the can up and sipped some of the juice before shoveling the peach chunks into her mouth.
“Damn, you were hungry,” said Dave, impressed. “How long has it been?”

“About twenty eight hours,” said Roxy, her mouth full. “Me and Jake got mugged on our way here. Some randos attacked our car and took all our food. And ever since I met up with you guys, it’s just sort of slipped my mind.”

Only twenty eight hours. That would make someone hungry, sure, especially if they weren’t used to long periods with no food. But Dave had gone longer than that on more occasions than he could count. It wasn’t as if there was anywhere in his apartment to keep food. It wasn’t as if he could sneak it in, or…

He shook himself. He had to stop thinking about that type of thing. This was exactly the wrong time to break down, and if he kept dwelling on the past, that was exactly what he would do.

Someone tapped his shoulder, and he jumped a foot.

“Who the fuck--” Dave turned around to see Karkat. The troll looked a little guilty.

“Oh, it’s just you. What’s up?” said Dave, pretending nothing had happened.

Karkat hissed something out in that weird language. The words were gibberish, but his tone was agitated. He jabbed a finger towards the front of the ship.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” said Dave. He nodded to Roxy before following Karkat.

When he reached the area where the helmsman sat, the cause of Karkat’s tension became clear. Through the windshield and down the road, a group of pods was visible. A fleet? An armada? Dave didn’t know the term. But whatever the group was to be called, it was intimidating as hell.

Rose wordlessly handed him the helmet.

“What are we going to do?” Dave asked once he had it on.

“I should be asking you that question,” Karkat snapped. “You’re the ones who wanted to rebel.”

“I believe the correct phrase of our course of action,” said Rose. “Would be ‘open fire.’”

Jade and John were sitting on the bench. Jade looked up in alarm. “What? That’s crazy! This pod is already damaged, we can’t go up against all those!”

“There are only six,” Rose said calmly. “And we now have additional, more powerful weapons.”

“But if they take out our pod, we’re done for!” argued Jade. “Without it, all we have is my gun and Jake’s pistols.”

“My pistols, too!” Roxy chimed in from the closet.

“I think you will find that statement to be incorrect. While you all were packing, I did some exploring.” Rose reached beneath the bench and pulled out a drawer.

The argument had attracted the attention of the other party members. As they walked in, Rose reached into the drawer, pulled out an array of blasters, and tossed one to each of them.

“From what I understand, these pack a stronger punch than your average Earth gun. We’ll still need to hit a pod quite a few times to fully destroy it, but these will make the process quicker.” Rose adjusted a dial on the side of the blaster. “Karkat has been showing me how to work them. Make
sure you keep the safety on when not in battle, a single shot can burn through flesh and bone.”

Dave shifted his shoulder uncomfortably. “Yeah, I can attest to that. Shit hurts.”

Rose nodded. “We must be vigilant as not to accidentally injure any of our allies. The blaster has three modes: safe, stun, and kill. We will most likely only be using the first and third.”

Jade nodded solemnly. “Okay.”

“Those pods have probably noticed us by now,” said John, sounding nervous. “What are we going to do?”

Karkat interrupted him with a harsh syllable. The troll reached down into another drawer and came up with an armful of fabric. He tossed some of it to John, pointing at himself.

“What-- oh!” John held up the fabric, which could now be recognized as a garment. Armor. “I just put this on over my clothes? Cool.” He began to slip on the suit.

Karkat passed the armor around, handing a suit to Dave last. “Don’t get killed,” he said gruffly.

Dave softly clutched the armor to his heart. “Karkat, I think that’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Shut up and put your clothes on.”

Dave pulled on the armor. It was snug, and restricted his movements a little, but not enough to be a problem. The problem would be in the fight itself. As long as he didn’t get hit too many times in the same place, the armor would protect him…

“Wait,” he said suddenly. “If this thing has armor and guns in stock, shouldn’t it have helmets, too?”

Karkat shrugged. “Yeah, probably? Why do you--” His eyes widened. “Shit. Translators!”

Dave knelt down and ran his hands along the bench. “Are there any more drawers here? Help me look, guys.”

“I’ll check the closets!” said Jake, heading for the back of the pod.

“I could make a joke about that,” said Dirk. Jake slapped him on the shoulder as he passed by.

For a few moments, the pod was filled only with the noise of frantic searching. Then, the quiet was broken by a triumphant shout.

“I’ve got some!” cried Jane. “Shucks, there’s enough for all of us!”

Karkat ran to her side and nodded an affirmation. “Yeah, those are right. Let me see them first, though.” He took one from the shelf before Jane and swapped it for his own.

“These are backups, I think,” he said to Dave. “They were each meant for a specific troll, in case their normal helmet got fucked up. Which should mean…” He paused. “Yeah. Each one has a trollhandle attached. If we want to contact each other, we can use these.”

“Hold on,” said Jade, alarmed. “If these are backups, then there are originals. Wouldn’t any message we send show up on the originals as well?”

“Trust me,” Karkat said grimly. “My squadron took care of the originals.”
There were no further protests.

Each team member took a helmet, and Dave was silently relieved that he wouldn’t have to keep passing around the one. This way, he could talk to Karkat whenever he wanted.

When had that become something he wanted?

Dave shook off the thoughts. “How are we doing this?” he asked, directing his question to no one in particular. “Pile out and start shooting?”

“I’ll be commanding the pod’s weapons,” said Karkat. “The rest is up to you, I guess.”

Dave looked to Rose. “You’re the strategist in residence. What do we do?”

“I stand by my earlier statement.” She approached the center of the pod, then dropped through the hole in the floor. “Open fire.”

Rose had guts, that much was certain. Dave watched as she ran out from beneath the shelter of the pod and fired straight toward the enemies. They didn’t take long to see her and begin offensive action. Dave jumped down, his hand wrapped tightly around the blaster. He tuned out the explosions and shouts, instead focusing on the feeling of his feet slapping against the ground as he ran.

You have armor on. You have people at your back. You’re safe. You’re going to win. You’re safe.

His thoughts were not so convincing. As soon as he stepped into the open, he felt himself balk. He could die. At any moment, Dave could be shot and killed. He wouldn’t die a hero, or as anyone worth remembering. He would just disappear… He felt his breath grow shallow.

But when he looked up, Karkat was standing in the window of the pod. Dave squinted. What was the idiot doing? He should be firing.

Instead, Karkat gave him a slow, hesitant thumbs up.

Dave grinned and returned the gesture.

You have people at your back. You’re going to win. You’re safe.

This time, the thoughts were a little more convincing. He turned to face the enemy pods and fired without hesitation.

The small fleet zoomed through the air, sending up gusts of wind. Their weapons struck smoking gorges into the pavement. Thankfully, they seemed to take longer to charge than the blasters the humans were armed with. Dave evaded every shot and returned in kind, watching dents appear in the sides of the pods he hit.

His friends darted back and forth, through a quickly-growing cloud of smoke. Dave took this as a good sign. If there’s smoke, there’s fire, and if there’s fire, some aliens just went down.

The air was thick with shots. Most were of the energy that fueled Alternian weapons, but Dave made out the crack of Jade’s rifle on multiple instances. After a while, he realized that the high-pitched sound of a blaster firing came much more often than the lower pitch of a pod’s weapon gearing up.

Sometimes, the blaster shots were accompanied by a crash.

Your friends are helping you. You have armor on. You haven’t been injured yet. You’re safe. You’re winning.
Dave searched through the haze. Hopefully, none of those crashes had been the sound of their own pod falling.

No. There it was, in all its slightly-beat-up glory. The cracked windows and scorch holes marked the pod that undoubtedly contained Karkat.

Dave didn’t know if Karkat could see him, there on the ground, but he hoped it was so. He gave a thumbs up in the direction of the pod.

Safe.

Dave turned back to the battle.

There was work to be done.
If Karkat could ignore the fact that he was killing trolls, he would be on top of the world.

He felt powerful. When he gave an order to the helmsman, the pod would buzz from the force of its blaster being fired. A beam would erupt from above the windshield, and suddenly, a chunk of ground would be obliterated. But the elation wouldn’t last. All too soon, the enemy would return fire, and Karkat’s pan would become clouded with confusing emotion.

“Fire,” he said. The helmsman was obedient, and soon enough an enemy pod dropped from the sky. Karkat fought to let the satisfaction overpower the guilt. He had joined this battle. There was no backing out now. The decision was made, and in a kill-or-be-killed situation, he would have to kill.

On the ground, the humans scurried to avoid the hail of deadly energy. He could see Dave through the smoke. The sunglasses-wearing human smiled and gave him a thumbs up. Karkat returned it.

Dave probably didn’t see him, but he turned back into battle as if he had. Karkat smiled.

Watching Dave fight was like looking in a mirror. There was the smallest element of hesitation to his movements, as if he didn’t really want to be there. You would only notice it if you had felt the same way. Otherwise, Dave was the picture of a warrior. He cut through the smoky battlefield to shoot down his foe, and he returned triumphant every time.

He probably could have won the fight all on his own. He had been trained, judging by the perfection of his dodges and shots. Karkat wondered who could have taught him. Earth was a much more peaceful planet than Alternia. Who, or what, could have prepared Dave for situations like this? He was a brilliant fighter on his own, and with the combined force of his friends, he was unstoppable.

It suddenly occurred to Karkat that Dave would have fit in much better on Alternia than he had.

What an asshole.

It felt like no time at all before the smoke began to clear and the humans emerged victorious. The six pods they had faced off against now lay in ruin, mechanical parts strewn across the ground. Dave and the other humans trooped back towards their pod.

Karkat glanced around the room. The pod he had remained in had not escaped unscathed. It had already been damaged in the fight to win it from its original owners, and now it was even more of a
mess. It hovered much lower to the ground than it had previously, and almost all the windows had been shattered. Scorch marks and holes peppered the hull. Luckily, it was still usable, or Karkat would suggest they abandon ship.

Dave was the first to clamber through the hole in the floor. “How’d we do? Not bad, right?”

“Did you see me shoot that one troll?” Roxy crowed. “Right between the eyes!”

“Oh, don’t,” said Jade despairingly. “Can we not talk about killing so happily? They’re people too, for pete’s sake!” Roxy quieted down.

Karkat ignored them both, focusing on Dave. “Good job,” he mumbled. It had been more than a good job. It was an excellent job, better than he ever could have done, but he wasn’t about to admit that.

“Thanks,” said Dave. He scratched the back of his neck. “Jesus, these helmets get hot. Roxy, hurry up with the translation software. I don’t want to keep wearing this thing.”

Roxy smiled. “Oh, good. I’m glad we’re still doing that. After we found more helmets, I was like, shit, no way did I do all that for nothing. I’ll get right on it.” She headed to the back of the pod to retrieve her laptop. Karkat stared after her.

“It’s weird to be able to talk to all of you at once.”

Dave laughed. “Yeah, and you’re not going to be able to call us ‘Assholes One through Eight’ anymore.”

“Wait, what?” John yelped.

“Stop butting in on other people’s conversations!” Karkat snapped. “Just because you can understand me now doesn’t mean you get to talk to me.”

John stuck out his tongue. “Grumpy.”

“John, leave him be,” said Rose. She was sitting on the bench, looking exhausted. “We have planning to do… Ugh. It’s a shame I won’t be able to use my needles anymore. They’d be useless against pods, but I’m much better with them than with a blaster.”

“I’m sure we can find plenty of foot soldiers for you to stab,” said Dave, dropping down onto the seat beside her. “We’re up against a big army.”

“No kidding,” said John. “I almost got shot in the face, and that was a pretty small fight!”

“Yes.” Rose was clearly off in her own little world of strategy. “It was small, and yet we came so close to grave injury… We need more members. These Alternian supplies have helped us greatly, but we still need stronger weapons… Hmm.” She stood up and raised her voice. “Could everyone come here, please? I want to discuss our plans.”

Roxy carried her laptop over, and the others came from whatever space in the pod they had been occupying to listen to Rose.

“There is much to be done,” she began. “I believe it would be best for us to take shifts. Some can rest, some will guard, and others will work on repairing this pod. Would anyone like to volunteer?”

“I’ll help repair,” said Karkat. “Knowing you idiots, you’d probably fuck everything up even worse
Dave shrugged. “I guess I’ll help repair too, then.”

Dirk, Jake, and John volunteered to guard. Rose seemed grateful for the opportunity to curl up and sleep, and she was joined by Jade and John. Roxy kept typing away, declaring that “Sleep is for the weak!”

Karkat flipped a switch, and the lights dimmed. The group settled into a more peaceful atmosphere. Dave kept his voice low when he spoke to Karkat.

“How are we supposed to repair this?”

Karkat shrugged. “There has to be duct tape somewhere.”

“Well.” Dave paused. “Yeah, that’s a fail-safe plan right there.”

“Shut up,” Karkat snapped. “How else are we going to patch these holes? I didn’t see you bring any scrap metal with you.”

“What are we going to do about the windows?”

“I don’t fucking know! We’ll figure something out!”

“Dude, shush.” Dave pressed a finger to Karkat’s lips. “You’ll wake the children.”

Karkat was speechless for a moment. “Did you just… Did you just shoosh pap me?”

Dave raised an eyebrow. “Is that just a weirdly intricate name for telling you to shut up, or does that actually mean something?”

“Of course it means something!” Karkat’s eyes widened in shock and anger. “What, do your moirallegiances not have paps involved? That’s fucking disgusting.”

“It’d be a little easier to understand why it was disgusting if I knew what a moirallegiance was,” said Dave.

Karkat froze. “You can’t be fucking serious. Tell me you’re being ‘ironic’ or whatever that shit is.”

Dave shook his head. “Nope, completely one hundred percent confused over here. Did I say something offensive?”

“No, not really, I…” Karkat was lost for words. How could humans not have moirallegiances? They were such an important part of society, a necessary bond for most trolls. Without moirails, the empire would fall into chaos. The entire social structure would collapse! There would be so much recklessness and violence…

Oh.

Humans wouldn’t need that sort of thing, would they.

“It’s nothing,” Karkat muttered. “I just forgot what your planet is like.”

Dave looked curious, but he didn’t press. “I guess I won’t do that in the future, then?”

Karkat nodded silently, then turned away, pretending to search for tape. Ugh. So humans didn’t have
moirails, then. If they didn’t have moirails, did they have other quadrants? How would that affect Karkat’s chances with Dave? Did humans have any kind of romance? It would be just his luck to get a crush on a member of an aromantic species.

But he really needed to stop thinking as if he would ever have a chance with Dave.

Karkat heard Dave walk away, and realized he had been holding his breath. He exhaled slowly. Something needed to be done. He needed to talk himself down from this stupid black crush, or force himself to get over Dave, something, anything, to ensure he wouldn’t end up disappointed.

He rummaged a bit through the pod’s drawers, but his pump biscuit really wasn’t in it. There probably wasn’t a way to fix the pod. They should just look for a new one.

Something tapped him on the back.

Karkat turned to see Dave, holding a roll of thick tape and grinning. What an idiot. Couldn’t he see that Karkat was trying not to think about him? Well, he probably couldn’t see anything through those stupid shades, but--

Stop it, Karkat.

“Where’d you find that?” he asked.

“I couldn’t find any in the pod, but there was some in Dirk’s bag,” said Dave. “Are we just gonna slap this shit on?”

“I guess so.” Karkat took the tape from Dave, taking care not to let their hands touch. He ripped off a piece and sought out the nearest hole. It was far too wide to be covered with a single strip of tape, so he followed the first with several others. Dave tore some from the roll and took it to the other side of the pod. They passed it back and forth between them, gradually covering the marks of the battle.

“Hey, Karkat?”

Karkat looked to his companion with a hint of suspicion. He didn’t like the tone Dave had used. It sounded… nervous.

“Yeah?” He did not turn around.

“Why’d you leave like that?”

Karkat should have seen this coming. With an outburst on the scale of his when he had left… Well, what could Dave do but wonder?

Dave coughed. “If I did something to make you mad, I would want you to tell me. I don’t know what I could’ve done to get you so pissed, but it’s pretty clear that our cultures are really different, so maybe I did on accident. I feel like I fucked up. I was all hyped over the possibility of making friends with you, so I probably did something weird, right?” He paused. “Sorry.”

There was a definite tremor to his voice. God, he was so fucking pathetic. Karkat kept his back turned. This wasn’t how a kismesis would act. A proper kismesis would respond in kind to all the black flirting Karkat had done, not get their feelings hurt over it. They wouldn’t get upset and apologize as if it were their fault.

But then again… Dave wasn’t his kismesis. He probably never would be. From the sound of things, he just wanted to be Karkat’s friend. And Karkat had gone and slapped him in the face for it.
“Don’t apologize,” he mumbled. “It’s not you. It’s just another troll thing, okay? I’m not pissed at you. I mean, you’re a douchebag and all, but I’m not trying to hurt you when I say that. I mean, I am, but not in that way.” He ran his hands through his hair. “Fuck. Okay. I’m sensing a really large cultural gap here, so I’m just going to say it. Do you have quadrants or not?”

Dave looked confused. “Quadrants?”

Karkat’s pump biscuit sank. “Yeah. If you even have to ask, you must not have them. Forget I said anything.” Dave tried to interrupt, but Karkat held up a hand. “Seriously. Don’t fucking mention it. I’m not mad at you. We can be friends or whatever the fuck you want.” He tried not to sound bitter. “Just… forget I said anything.”

Dave still looked upset, and it was making Karkat uncomfortable. He didn’t know how he was supposed to react. There were other humans around, why didn’t Dave go talk to them? They certainly seemed curious enough, sitting in the back of the pod, being all nosy. Why didn’t they go away?

Why wouldn’t everyone just go away?

“Okay,” said Dave. “If you’re sure, I guess.” He took the tape and tugged off a new piece. He turned away to stick it to the wall.

Karkat didn’t know what the hell he was feeling, but for once, it wasn’t hatred.

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Karkat couldn’t recall when he fell asleep. He must have traded shifts eventually, because when he woke, he was covered in sopor and the girl, Rose, was shaking him awake. Once he realized what was going on, he sat up so fast their heads almost collided.

“What’s going on? Are we being attacked?”

She laughed. “No, don’t worry. We’re just having a meeting. We elected to let you sleep late, but we should probably fill you in now before you miss too much.”

“Oh.” Karkat rubbed the sleep from his glance nuggets as quickly as he could. “Okay, I’m awake.”

“Good. We’ve decided to retreat further into the city. Our last fight, while small, undoubtedly attracted some attention. All fights will. We will need to be careful who we make ourselves vulnerable to.”

“And the translator’s coming along well,” Roxy chimed in. “I’m almost done. Give me a few more hours.”

“And, finally, we decided to stay in this pod,” said Dave. “As long as it’s able to run, we’ll run it, and then we’ll find a new one. We can shoot one down and steal it or something.”

Karkat frowned. “If we do shoot one down, we’ll have to be extra careful about it. Helmsmen can’t be moved from ship to ship. We’ll need to leave the pilot alive if we switch to a new vessel.”

“That’s fine. We don’t have to worry about it yet, at least.” Dave glanced at the helmsman. “Can you have him take us towards the city?” Karkat nodded and repeated the order. The pod began to move through the air towards what Karkat assumed was downtown.
“Let us continue,” said Rose. “Now, Dirk. You have a fairly wide social network, if I am correct?”


“We need to find a way to attract human attention while still flying under the Alternian radar. Dave’s Twitter account has been accomplishing this until now, but it isn’t enough. We need to build a strong group of people who are willing to fight for us.”

“Sure. I think the internet is the best place to go about doing that, but I can shoot out messages to some other Texas street rats if you want.” He pulled out his phone and began thumbing out a text. After a moment, he paused. “I just had an idea.”

“Do tell!” said Jake.

Dirk looked at Karkat. “How would you feel if I texted Delilah?”

Karkat froze.

That was the name Dirk had mentioned before. The woman he had claimed was Karkat’s “mom.” The reason that he was some kind of strange half-breed…

In truth, he didn’t know how he would react. He didn’t know anything about this human he was somehow so connected to. Was she even worth meeting? Or could her presence change everything?

Maybe she would have the answers he was still searching for.

_Why was I even ha… no, not hatched, born. Why would she choose to create me?_

“Go ahead,” said Karkat.

“Cool. I haven’t heard from her in ages, I hope her number’s still the same. I think it will be, though. She always likes to be accessible.” Dirk continued fiddling with his cell phone, oblivious to Karkat’s turmoil, or maybe just ignoring it.

After a moment, one corner of his mouth curled up into a half-grin. “The text went through. If it turns out we had the wrong number, we can just coerce whoever got the message into joining us.”

_Unless nobody responds._

“Try to reach anyone you can,” said Rose. “Perhaps there will be some people in this area.”

“You know what else we should look for?” Dave said suddenly. “More weapons. I mean, this is the Southwest, there are gonna be people with guns. _Lots_ of guns. Maybe we could even find a supply store that hasn’t been looted.”

“If we’re lucky,” said Rose. “But yes. We should continue to look out for any artillery we can get our hands on. I would actually suggest finding a military base, if it weren’t for the probability of it already being in use against the trolls, and our childish lack of training.”

“Oh, pish posh,” said Jake, waving his hand. “My family has an extensive history of weaponry. The same principles lie behind guns and larger guns, so I’m sure I would work it out in a jiffy. How hard could it be?”

“Very hard,” said Dirk, smiling. “New rule: Nobody lets Jake near the tanks without at least making him watch a YouTube tutorial on how to operate them.”
The conversation devolved into playful banter, but Karkat was stuck on the subject of his mother. Would she respond? Could she? Maybe she was dead already. The idea of her death didn’t bother him, as everyone on Alternia was fated to never know their ancestors, but a tiny part of him, he knew, would regret never knowing her. That must have been the human part.

Dirk’s phone chimed, and all conversation ceased. He checked the notification.

“It’s her,” he said quietly.

Karkat fought to make his voice work. “And what did she say?”

“She said she wants to meet us. She’s moved since I last saw her, but she kept this number. She could be here in a few days.” Dirk hesitated. “I didn’t say you were with us. Do you want me to tell her?”

Karkat considered this. Telling her might make her travel faster, and therefore arrive faster, which he wasn’t sure if he was ready for. But keeping it a secret would cause a certain amount of awkwardness when she did arrive… And even if it was only a lie of omission, it felt wrong to not divulge his presence.

“Yeah.”

Dirk nodded, quickly typing out another message before setting his phone down. “It’s weird that you don’t know who she is. Don’t you remember anything?”

Karkat looked to Dave on instinct. This wasn’t a conversation he was ready to have, and he needed someone to notice. But Dave looked just as curious as Dirk.

“I don’t know,” Karkat said uncomfortably. “I remembered one thing about my ancestor--” He paused. What was it they had called their male relatives in all those Earth films?

“My dad,” he said finally. The word felt strange in his mouth, but with a note of familiarity. “I remembered looking at the sky with him. He looked like me.”

“Yeah, he did. You took after him.” Dirk leaned back against the wall of the pod. “You looked more like your mom as a kid, though. The horns didn’t even grow in until you were a year old. You looked human from the start, which was a lucky break. If anybody had seen you once you started turning, it wouldn’t have been a good scene, trust me.”

Karkat wished he could remember any of the events Dirk described. They all sounded as if they must belong to someone else. He felt like an imposter trying to remember the life he had forgotten, the person he used to be.

“How did Karkat’s father survive here? Trolls don’t look anything like humans,” said Rose, frowning. “Why did he come at all?”

“I don’t know. I did wonder, though. I wondered a lot. I didn’t even know he was an alien. I respected him enough not to ask, but though I knew there was something weird going on. As for why he came… I’ve got a couple theories. Maybe it had something to do with his blood. But I think it was more likely that he was a scout of some sort.” Dirk’s face darkened. “That would make things complicated. It would mean he either fell in love with Delilah and stayed here so long to keep the trolls from invading, or he was lying to us the entire time.”

Karkat didn’t want to hear any more. He jumped back into the conversation. “How did you meet my… um, parents?” He hoped someone would pick up on his attempt to change the subject.
Dirk shrugged. “Delilah was one of the people walking around the streets. I was another. She got her life together once she had you, got herself a place, and she let me stay with her a while. She let a lot of people stay with her. She and your dad were like the gods of the homeless. Everybody knew and respected them, just because they were good people.” He smiled briefly. “They would’ve been good to you, too.”

“How did you get off Earth, anyway?” said Jade, curious.

Karkat shook his head. “I don’t remember.”

“Delilah didn’t like talking about it,” said Dirk. “One day, Karkat and the Sufferer just disappeared, and that was the end of it. That’s why I put more stock in the scouting theory. He must have gotten called back. Honestly, I’m surprised it took so long for the planet to be invaded.”

Yet again, Karkat found himself ignoring parts of Dirk’s speech. But this time it was not a conscious effort. As soon as the word “Sufferer” escaped Dirk’s lips, Karkat’s posture pole had slammed upright, and he stared at the blond boy with something close to horror.

“What did you call him?”

“What, the Sufferer? That’s all people ever said, I don’t know his real name.”

“No, no.” A nervous laugh bubbled up as Karkat laced his fingers together, trying to keep calm. “You aren’t telling me that the Signless fucking Sufferer is my ancestor?”

“You okay, dude?” Dave whispered.

“No,” Karkat snapped. “No, I am really not fucking okay, because I have one human ancestor and one who is none other than the most infamous mutant in Alternian history. God, it wasn’t enough for me to just have red blood, was it? I had to be the ultimate freak. The Sufferer is a legend. He’s the forbidden kind of legend. The kind of historical figure where you can’t even be sure if he was real. He tried to eradicate the blood caste system, and ended up starting a war that makes up the most notable part of troll history. Except nobody’s allowed to know that history, because he lost. Except… everybody does know about it. Everybody does.”

“Well, that isn’t a bad thing,” said Dave. “You’re following in his footsteps.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good thing, either,” Karkat muttered. He raked his fingers through his hair, the movement violent. “Fuck. Fuck!” He pushed himself up and began to pace back and forth. The words began to pour from his mouth before he realized what he was saying. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. I’m not the Sufferer. At least he put up a fight before he died! I’m not like him, I’m not brave like that, I’m not a troll like that. I don’t have what it takes to be a troll, but I can’t just abandon my entire goddamn species. But they’re not even my species. This is all so fucked up. Who do I fight for? What am I?” All the conflicting emotions which had recently begun to lessen were flooding back, and it took all he had not to scream.

“Hey. Stop it.” Before he knew it, Dave was at his side, his hands clamped onto Karkat’s shoulders. “You’re beating the crap out of yourself. You’re whatever you want to be, okay? All those standards don’t apply to you anymore. You’re in charge now. Don’t force yourself into the role of a troll or human if that’s not what you are. You get to choose.”

Karkat was painfully aware of the others watching them. He didn’t feel much better, but he kept his mouth shut. It was a miracle that Dave had managed to make him feel even the slightest bit better. Maybe that stupid hatecrush was finally going away. That was enough of a happy thought for Karkat
to clear his meal tunnel, wipe his glance nuggets, and, “Sorry. You’re right.”

“S’okay. I know what it’s like to be confused and freaked out.” A shadow flickered across Dave’s face. “Believe me, I know.”

There was that feeling again. The lack of anger, the presence of something that was in no way hateful. Karkat looked at Dave, and his confusion only increased.

But when Dave suddenly pulled Karkat into a hug, it didn’t feel wrong.

It didn’t feel wrong at all.

Chapter End Notes

Aight folks here's the dealio. Next week I will be totally off the grid, and thus unable to write or post, so there won't be an update next week. I should have the next chapter done by 8/4/16, which is the Thursday after next. It might take a little longer than that, but not too much!

You know those fics that are super good but then the author takes a hiatus and never comes back? I do. I know that pain. And I will not put my lovely readers through it. I promise an update within three weeks! :)

Thank you for reading!
Karkat was a mess, that much was certain. That much Dave could relate to. They may have been from different planets, with different cultures and different ways, but damn it, they were both fucked up, and that was a bonding point.

Dave tightened his grip for a moment, then released Karkat. The troll looked at him oddly as he pulled away. Fuck. That had been weird, hadn’t it?

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” said Dave, nonchalant. Mentally, he was taking a breath of relief. He had almost messed up with Karkat so many times. He didn’t want it to happen in such an awkward way as a misplaced hug.

He was still wondering about those “quadrants” Karkat had mentioned. Clearly they were something important, or the troll wouldn’t have made such a big deal out of it. Dave had probably done something wrong, but as long as Karkat would still tolerate him, he’d stick around. Having an alien friend was cool. And even beyond the exotic factor, Karkat was a good guy. Dave would have wanted him for a friend even if he wasn’t from another galaxy.

He quickly looked away. Staring at Karkat for long stretches of time while getting lost in his thoughts wouldn’t make the troll like him any more. Even if the staring was so enjoyable. Christ, Dave wished for his camera. The good one, not the one on his phone. (While iPhones did have good camera quality, nothing could compare to the chunky camera with all the zoom lenses and accessories that Dave kept under his bed). One blurry snap of Karkat would probably be the best photo Dave could ever take.

“So, uh… We’re set for supplies. We can’t fight yet. And we don’t need to go anywhere… What should we do?” he said. It was a painfully obvious cutoff from the previous scene, but lingering too long on emotional subjects made Dave nervous.

Karkat shrugged. “We could explore.”
Dave smiled. “I didn’t think you were the ‘zealous-about-foreign-culture’ type.”

“I’m not. Walking around cities can be entertaining, no matter the planet they’re located on. And anything’s better than this cramped hellhole.” Karkat dropped to the floor and sat next to the trapdoor-like exit. He and Dave had mostly patched up the hole in the floor, but there was enough room left to wriggle through.

“Stop the pod,” Karkat commanded the helmsman. The pod halted, and Karkat slipped through the hole to the ground. “You coming along?”

“You guys could consult us before you go rushing off,” Jade said crossly. “What if we wanted to do something else?”

“Then I’d tell you to have a good time.” Dave waved to her. “Bye.” He grabbed Karkat by the hand and tugged him away, running across the street into an intersection. “Okay, tell me where to go before I start regretting everything.”

“Dave,” Karkat said in awe. “You are such an asshole.” For a moment, Dave looked hurt, but Karkat rushed to continue. “I mean, that was awesome. I wouldn’t think you’d have it in you to ditch them like that.”

“It’s not ditching if you’re going to come back. Besides, you looked like you needed a moment to get away from everything.”

“Dave, your definition of ditching is wrong, just so you know. But…” Karkat studied his face. “Thanks.”

Dave shrugged. “S’nothing.” Receiving thanks made him feel awkward. For a moment, he thought back to the times when he had no friends. Those were good times.

“So, where are we going?” asked Karkat.

“Uh… I don’t know. It’s your choice, really. I’m sure this town has to have something to offer. It might be something super fucking lame, but it’ll be something, and we’ve just got to find it. It’d be just my luck to stumble across the one town in the southwestern United States with absolutely nothing interesting in it, though, wouldn’t it? Although, that’s most southwestern towns. That’s most southwestern states. Fuck. We need to take a vacation to the coasts if we ever want to find anything good. Whaddaya say, Karkat? We could snatch another pod, pack up the doritos and be on our merry way--”

“Shut up, Dave. You’re rambling.”

“Oh. Right.” Dave brushed his bangs across his forehead. It was a self-conscious habit, and an unfortunate one, given that it made him look like more of a tool than ever. He stopped once he realized he was doing it. “Should we try for a movie theater? Maybe there’ll be some candy left.”

To his surprise, Karkat’s eyes lit up. “Can we?”

“Yeah, dude. You ready for some magical Earth flavors?”

Karkat scoffed. “I don’t give two shits about your terrible candy. I want to see the movies, stupid.” He paused for a second, then cleared his throat. “I mean, so I can gauge how awful they are compared to troll movies. I bet they all suck.”

Dave raised an eyebrow, a smirk beginning to play across his lips. “Oh, no. No. That was too long a
pause. You really want to see them, don’t you? You are into foreign culture!”

“I don’t care if they’re from Earth or not, okay?” Karkat snapped. “I just want to go watch something.”

Dave’s smirk vanished. “Right. Sorry.” An uncomfortable silence brewed between them. Dave broke it as fast as he could. “I don’t know how theaters work, but I could try to get something running for us. Want to go and try?”

“That’d be nice.” Karkat went quiet. “You lead the way, I guess.”

Dave pulled out his phone, grateful for the excuse to look away. It looked like the closest movie theater was a few blocks down. He pointed in its direction and gave Karkat a questioning look. The troll nodded.

“Apparently, when the end of all things hit, the popular movies were… Shit. We have to watch Captain America. It’s necessary for survival.”

Karkat looked at him, confused. “What’s that?”

“Oh, man. You wouldn’t know anything about Marvel. I mean, I could explain stuff to you, but that could take ages…” Dave found himself smiling. “What do you think about superheroes?”

“I think they’re moronic and usually overpowered.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. Cap’ll change your mind.” Dave patted Karkat’s shoulder.

The troll stiffened at his touch.

Fuck. He’d done something wrong again, hadn’t he?

“Dave,” Karkat said wearily. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“What am I looking like?”

“Like I just shat all over your favorite sweater. Stop acting so wounded.”

“I’m not wounded,” Dave protested. “I’m just--”

“Shut up.” Karkat slapped a hand over his mouth. Dave frowned.

“There’s no need for--”

“Shut up!” Karkat’s eyes were wide with fear. “I can hear something.”

“I don’t hear anything.” Dave mumbled.

“That’s because your human auricular sponge clots are puny and underdeveloped,” Karkat hissed. “Something’s coming.” He craned his neck to look down the street, then swore. “Fuck, I think it’s a pod. Hide!” He grabbed Dave and dragged him to the closest intersection. The two turned the corner and ducked into the hollow of a shop entrance.

“Do you have a weapon on you?” Karkat whispered.

There was barely any space in the doorway between the two of them. Dave’s sword was tucked into a strap at his belt, but he knew that he wouldn’t have room to pull it out if he tried. He scooted back
as far as he could. No luck. No matter how he tried to subtly wriggle away, Karkat remained pressed against him. Karkat was a bit shorter than Dave, and if he leaned in, his head would fall into Dave’s neck. Dave swallowed hard. This wasn’t what he should be thinking about.

“Yeah, I do. But it won’t do us much good. It’s just a sword.”

“I’ve got my blaster.” Karkat glanced out towards the road. “Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to a fight, or we’re fucked.”

Dave became aware of a faint humming noise. It grew into a buzz, the rumble of an engine at work. He chanced a peek out of their niche. Karkat had been right; there was a pod cruising down the street. It was larger than their own, and the gun protruding from the front was extremely noticeable. He ducked back out of sight.

“We shouldn’t have split up from the others.” Dave’s grip on his sword handle tightened. “Oh, shit. That pod’s headed right towards them.”

“Dave, we can’t take it on our own,” said Karkat, a note of hopelessness in his voice. “Either they pass by without noticing anything, or we’ll have to join the others once the fight has already started. If we jump in there now we’ll be shot.”

Dave’s fingers tapped at the wall. “This is my fault. We shouldn’t have left.” The buzz of the pod’s engine was joined by one in the back of his mind. It was like static, black and white and angry. The tangles of fear and guilt were beginning to grow and swirl around faster and faster.

“It’s not your fault. I’m the one who freaked out,” Karkat grumbled.

“No, no, it’s my fault.” Dave had one hand around his right arm and was squeezing hard. “I didn’t even give them an explanation. I just left. Who does that?”

“Somebody who cares more about helping their friend than what others think,” said Karkat.

Dave’s grip lessened slightly. “You’re willingly referring to me as your friend? That’s new.”

Karkat didn’t respond. Dave saw his hand twitch, and reach up as if to touch Dave, but then, his focus was shattered.

The pod’s engine had stopped running.

And in the newfound silence, the scrape of a blade being drawn could be clearly heard.

*Draw! Drawdrawdrawhe’scomingfuckfuckblockparryslicefUCK*

*Beaherodavewinthefightfightback*

*Don’tyouloseblockjabGODDAMNITdoitnowfuckingfight*

Karkat looked at him sharply. “Dave, what’s wrong?”

Dave’s breathing was shallow. He tried for a calm breath, but all he managed was a gasp. Fuck. It was happening again. Just when he’d been starting to get comfortable around Karkat and everyone else, it had to come back to bite him.

Nobody would want someone like him on their team, not someone who couldn’t fight too long without flipping their shit. Nobody would want to be friends with someone who was more scared of
his friends secretly hating him than being killed in battle. He didn’t belong in the Resistance. Revolution was for heroes, and despite Bro’s training, Dave had failed every objective. He wasn’t a hero. He was nothing. How could he ever have forgotten?

“Dave, what the fuck is going on?” Karkat’s hands were on his shoulders. Dave shuddered.

“No, don’t, don’t touch me!” Karkat let him go, and Dave instantly regretted saying anything. The contact had been sort of nice, and the flash of guilt in Karkat’s face only made him feel worse.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “Fuck, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“What the hell are you apologizing for?” Karkat looked completely baffled.

Dave shook his head helplessly. “I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“I’m…” Dave realized that he was shaking. It was a disconnected sort of realization, as if he wasn’t the one doing the shaking. He was just watching it occur. There was a widening gap between his panicked mind and twitching body, and he didn’t know how to close it. “I’m…”

“Don’t fucking say sorry.” Karkat put both hands on Dave’s jaw and forced eye contact between them. “How can I help you?”

Dave couldn’t respond. He didn’t know how. He had never found a way to snap himself out of it. All he could do was wait until it was over, but right now, they didn’t have the time for that. They had to save their friends from a situation Dave had gotten them into.

Karkat sighed. “Okay, look. You didn’t do anything wrong. This isn’t your fault. The pod would’ve come this way even if we hadn’t left, and the only thing this changes is which angle we fight from. Everything is going to be okay. Your friends are totally capable on their own, so this hasn’t hurt them, but they need you to fight with them. So I’m going to get you out of this. Understand?”

Dave nodded. He couldn’t manage words, but focusing on Karkat’s speech was enough.

“You’re going to be fine,” Karkat continued. “Just stay with me and we can blow up some assholes. We’ll win this fight, and then move on to the next one, you hear? Take deep breaths.” He inhaled slowly to set an example. Dave mimicked him, his own breathing beginning to slow. The static in his mind lessened.

Karkat carefully leaned in to rest his head on Dave’s shoulder. He seemed unsure of what to do. Under different circumstances it would have been adorable, but Dave was too busy trying to calm himself down to think about that.

Karkat patted his back gently. It was a calming motion, and after a few minutes of peaceful attention, Dave felt himself begin to completely relax. The speed of it surprised him. It could sometimes take hours for him to recover from a panic attack, but here he was, being quickly soothed into health by an alien.

“Are you ready to go kick ass?” Karkat asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Dave murmured. “Um. Thanks.”

“You’d better thank me. What the hell was that, Strider?” Karkat’s voice was not sharp. He sounded concerned.
“Nothing. It just happens sometimes, don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it? Dave, you looked like… I can’t even fucking describe it. There’s no way that can be normal for you.” Karkat looked up to make eye contact. Dave was glad of the helmet’s visor coming between them. Karkat’s gaze was all-seeing, and if he was forced to look directly into those crimson eyes, he didn’t know what would happen. “Can it?”

“It’s fine,” said Dave. “Let’s just go fight.”

“No, seriously. If that’s a normal occurrence, I need to know how to react.” Karkat pulled away, leaving a sudden lack of warmth at Dave’s neck. “You just sprang that shit on me out of nowhere.”

Dave flinched. He knew how sudden his attacks could be. He couldn’t control them, but that didn’t make him feel any better.

“No, stop thinking whatever you’re thinking,” Karkat snapped. “I didn’t mean that in a bad way. What I meant was, next time I want to be able to help you properly. I was just guessing at what to do this time.”

Dave allowed for a small smile. “Pretty good for a guess.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Karkat backed out of the doorway. “Now get out your sword, moron, we’ve got friends to assist.”

Dave drew his sword. The metal gleamed in the sunlight, and he took a moment to look at its deadly shine. This was not an instrument of pain, he reminded himself. It was what would keep him safe. It was what would save them all.

“Okay,” he said.

He followed Karkat around the corner and stopped to observe the scene before them. The pod had halted in place. Down the street, their own pod was visible. It was inconspicuous, but not invisible.

“They must have noticed by now,” Karkat muttered.

Judging by the shot that fired a split second later, he was correct.

The beam whizzed down the street, heading straight for their pod. It swerved to the side. The beam grazed by, taking off a chunk of the hull.

“Fuck, I don’t know how well they’ll be able to control the helmsman,” said Karkat. “New plan.”

He whipped out his blaster, quickly switching the setting from “stun” to “kill,” and ran out towards the pod. Dave gaped for a moment before coming to his senses and dashing after his friend, sword at the ready.

Karkat planted his feet a short distance from his opponent and began firing. His shots were rhythmic, one after the other, steadily pounding away at the framework of the pod. Dave stood awkwardly by his side. It wasn’t like he could just lob a katana at it.

“Go to the others,” Karkat ordered. “They’ll notice me in a split second, so I need you at my back with weapons that can actually do damage.”

Dave didn’t hesitate before running. He made his way over to their pod as fast as he could, then jumped up through the floor. His friends barely had time to glance at him before he was giving directions. “Karkat’s on the ground, he needs your help, start shooting!”
In a normal situation, he would have been apologizing. He would have been saying sorry for getting them into this mess, and probably freaking out internally. But there was no time for that. Yes, he had gotten them into this, but now he had to focus on getting them out.

There was a fine line between being overwhelmed and keeping cool. Dave was treading that line. Every sense he had was screaming at him, telling him to break down and curl up into a shaking ball, but he kept them at bay. He grabbed a blaster and kept himself grounded. He was going to fight, and he was going to win. Karkat needed him.

His friends, luckily, wasted no time. The pod’s giant blaster was gearing up to shoot, and already, each Resistance member as equipped with a blaster. They aimed at the enemy pod and fired in unison.

“Okay. Rose, you’re in charge of steering. Just keep us from getting hit,” said Dave. “Dirk, you’ve got the big guns. Hit them with whatever we’ve got, hopefully the helmsman will listen. Roxy, Jade, and Jake, shoot from inside. John and Jane, you two are coming with me. We need to help Karkat.” Without another word, he slipped back through the hole in the floor.

Dave hit the ground running. He headed straight for the enemy, aiming for the underbelly of their ship. Karkat appeared to be doing the same thing. They locked eyes and nodded, then began circling the pod and firing in tandem. John and Jane completed the circle.

Their opponent noticed them quickly. The pod swooped down low over their heads, forcing them to duck and cover, then broke away from their circle and hovered menacingly before them. Its back faced the Resistance’s pod, but it was not defenseless. The giant gun swiveled on the rooftop to face Dave’s friends. Now it was aiming for all the members of the Resistance at once.

Several panels slid away in the sides, and new guns appeared. They weren’t as big as the one on the top, but they were definitely still deadly.

“Does this thing have any blind spots?” John yelled. “Or weak spots?”

“How should I know?” Karkat shouted back. “I’ve never fucking seen one of these before. We’ll just have to find out.” He took a deep breath. “Here goes nothing.” He ran directly underneath the pod and began to shoot, the others following his lead.

“This is a weak spot on the smaller models, I think,” Karkat yelled over the sound of gunfire. “But I don’t know about these big pods. Just keep going!” The bursts of light and heat emitted by the blasters hammered away at the bottom of the pod. They made plenty of noise, but didn’t seem to be doing much. Karkat swore.

“At least it’s a blind spot. Just keep going, they can’t stay strong forev--”

His words were interrupted by a swoosh, and a panel opened in the pod’s floor. A pair of hands reached out, grabbed Karkat, and tugged him up. The panel slammed shut just before Dave fired a sizzling ray at it. It struck the metal, but did no good.

Karkat was gone.

“What the fuck just happened?” John screeched.

Dave fired repeatedly at the spot where Karkat had vanished, but his efforts were in vain. The metal was resolute in its scheme to steal his friend away. “I don’t know, but we have to--”

Just as suddenly as the pod had snatched Karkat, it whirled around. The movement sent a breeze that
would have ruffled Dave’s bangs had he not been wearing a helmet.

The largest gun shifted and focused in on Jane. She whimpered.

Roxy leaned out the shattered window of the Resistance pod. “Run, idiot!” she screamed.

Jane leapt out of the way just as the pod shot a beam directly where she had been standing. For a moment, all was still. The melted blacktop bubbled and hissed.

Then, the pod’s engine revved, and it sped away.

Dave didn’t let the surprise take over. The adrenaline rushing through his veins prompted him to action, and he chased after the pod, shouting, “Hey! Fuck, don’t take him!” He ran block after block, his friends disappearing from both his sight and his mind. The only thing he felt was the hot exhaust of the pod blowing into his face and the pavement slapping against his feet. His eyes and legs burned, but the rest felt numb.

He stopped only when it was impossible to keep running.

His knees buckled beneath him, and he collapsed onto the ground. He had failed again. Karkat had slipped away under his guard, and there was no way to get him back.

Dave was alerted to the presence of his friends by the sound of puffing breaths. John grabbed him by the shoulder. “Dave! Holy crap, you’re fast.” He glanced up and seemed to sag. “You didn’t catch them, huh?”

Dave winced. “I wasn’t fast enough.”

“I doubt any of us could have been,” said Rose. She squinted towards the horizon, where the pod that held Karkat was disappearing. “This certainly throws a wrench in our plans… But we must continue on.”

Dave frowned. “Are you saying we’re not going to help him?”

“Of course we are. All I am saying is that we must not let this discourage us. We will continue on the path we have set, with a detour to rescue a friend.” Rose pulled off her helmet. “I suppose we won’t be needing to wear these constantly while he’s gone.”

She treated Karkat’s absence as a temporary thing, which was a comfort to Dave. This was only a brief obstacle. There was still hope.

“For now, we must focus on tracking that pod and finding out what they want with Karkat. Dave, would you try contacting him?”

Dave nodded and opened pesterChum.

-- arsenicCatnip [AC] began trolling carcinogeneticist [CG] --

AC: hey you there

AC: please be there

AC: karkat

AC: please
AC: fuck
AC: ok well were coming to get you dont worry
AC: itl all be ok
AC: just dont get yourself killed or anything

-- arsenicCatnip [AC] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

“He’s not responding,” Dave said quietly.

Rose pursed her lips. “I expected as much. They must have confiscated his helmet… Well, we’ll find a solution.”

Their pod came slowly rolling up. Roxy tumbled out the bottom.

“This thing runs so much better when he controls it,” she complained. “We need him back as soon as possible.”

Rose looked at her. She stared back.

“Fuck,” she sighed. “I’ve got more coding to do, haven’t I?”

“As you are the most competent with computers of all of us, yes, I am sorry to say you do.”

“I’m not half bad,” Dirk interjected. “She could work on finding Karkat and I could continue with the translators. I mean, she’d need hardware knowledge for that anyway, and that’s my field.”

Rose looked to Roxy for confirmation, and, receiving a nod, smiled. “That sounds perfect. Shall we begin work immediately?”

“Nope,” said Roxy. “I don’t know about you, but I’m fucking exhausted.” She trudged back to the pod’s entrance. “Let me nap a while!” she called over her shoulder. “And eat. Work hard, play hard, you know how it is. Normally my idea of ‘play’ would be a martini and a Parks and Rec marathon, but hey, I’ll settle for sleep.”

She climbed up into the pod without another word.

“I think we should all rest,” said Jade. “We’re beat up. I’ll take guard duty first, I guess.” She yawned. “But it might have to be a short shift.”

The party trooped back to the pod with only a bit more conversation. With Karkat absent, the mood had turned sober, and no one was very talkative. Dave curled up on the pod’s bench in utter silence.

The familiar trains of thought were beginning to loop once more. He was supposed to be a hero, but he had let everything go wrong. He had… He was…

He was so fucking tired.

At some point, the adrenaline had left his system, and it left him feeling groggy. The exhaustion he had kept at bay crashed over him, and he had no time to dwell on anxiety before he sank into sleep.

He would face his fate come morning.
Bad news, readers. I have gotten myself grounded from all technology until school starts. It's going to be a while before I can update. :( 

But I stand by my promise! This fic will not be abandoned.

See you in September, and thank you for reading!
Chapter Summary

"Run neon tiger there's a price on your head
They'll hunt you down and gut you, I'll never let them touch you
Away, away, oh, run
I'm begging you neon tiger run"

-Neon Tiger, The Killers

Chapter Notes

I'm still grounded but I managed to come up with a chapter anyhow! :)

The moment Karkat was snatched up, he was cuffed around the nugbone and pushed to the floor. His helmet was forcibly removed, and he could barely shout a curse word before some troll was up in his face. It was surely a highblood. No low-ranking soldier would have the confidence to grab him so roughly and slap him around before spitting in his face. The rest of the squadron watched, laughing at Karkat’s misfortune.

“Finally found you, mutant,” the highblood whispered.

Karkat fought to keep his expression blank. How much did they know? Bluffing could either be his saving grace or his doom. He’d have to take the chance.

“What are you talking about?”

The highblood smirked and looked to the helmsman. “Get us out of here.”

Karkat scrambled up, only to be shoved down again by one of the other trolls. The pod began to move beneath him. He could hear the faint noise of impact where, on the other side of the metal walls, the Resistance was firing. Dave. Fuck, they were taking him away from Dave!

He rolled over and faced the floor, helpless, as the noises ceased. The pod slid smoothly away. He didn’t know where it was going, or why. How long would it be before he could reunite with his friends? Would he ever see them again?

He probably should have been worrying about his own situation.

The enemy trolls were still watching him, most likely to keep him contained. Karkat’s glance nuggets narrowed as he turned back to face them.

“All right, chucklefucks. Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Their leader sneered. “You seem to be under the motherfuckin’ impresson that you’ve got the right to speak to any of us.”
Karkat took a closer look at the symbol emblazoned on the highblood’s chest.

It was purple. Of fucking course it was purple. Karkat could’ve ended up kidnapped by a troll of any caste, and he got the one notoriously filled with psychopaths. At this point, he shouldn’t have been surprised by such dismal luck. He would just have to deal with it and try not to end up as a smear of paint in a clown mural.

“I don’t give two fucks about whatever rights you think I do or don’t possess. I want to know where we’re going,” said Karkat.

The highblood raised his eyebrows. “Well, that’s just too motherfuckin’ bad, brother. Cause you ain’t findin’ out shit.”

Karkat scowled. “Tell me why you’re taking me, then.”

“I thought even a mutant would have the smarts to figure that out, but I guess I all up and overestimated you.”

“Fuck you. Does it really take this much drama to capture one mutant? There’s got to be some other reason, and I want to know what it is.” Karkat stared directly into the purple-blood’s glance nuggets.

The other troll’s gaze did not waver. “Need I repeat myself? You ain’t findin’ out shit. So calm yourself, brother. Get your chill on. Maybe you’ll find the means to cooperate soon. And if you don’t…” He chuckled, low and menacing. “Well, I’m sure you will.”

Karkat opened his mouth to protest, but only succeeded in swallowing a mouthful of sopor as a full container of it was dumped over his head. He sputtered, but the effect had already taken hold. Drowsiness began to cloud his pan. He could barely muster a quiet “fuck” before he dropped to the floor, asleep.

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Karkat was woken by a slap to the face. His glance nuggets shot open, and his hand whipped out to strike back, but someone grabbed onto his wrist before he could move.

“It’s time for you to shut up and cooperate,” a troll’s voice hissed. Karkat looked around. Ah, yes. All the idiots from the previous night were present. The one restraining him threw him against the wall of the pod before releasing him.

“So. That squadron of yours. Tell us who they are. I want blood colors, names, and symbols. I want to know how you convinced highbloods to harbor a freak like you. I’ll have questions regarding your own situation afterwards, but first, I want you to give us what we want.”

Karkat winced. His nugbone ached from where it had collided with the wall. It sent dull throbs of pain through his pan as he spoke. “I won’t tell you.”

“Oh, really?” The troll squatted down in front of him. Her horns nearly poked Karkat in the glance nuggets. “Because if you don’t, we can turn right back and slaughter that group of humans you were hiding out with.” Karkat spared a glance to the symbol on her shirt. Indigo. She wasn’t kidding, then. But...

He swallowed. “How do I know you won’t do that anyway?”

“Oh, you don’t. But I can assure you that it would be better for you if you cooperated.”
Karkat sat up. “I won’t tell you anything.”

“Oh, really?” Her blue eyes glittered. “All right, then.” She snapped her fingers. “Cairdi, take him to the back.”

A smaller troll hurried forward and dragged Karkat to a standing position. His hands were pinned behind his back, and he was led to the back of the pod. The indigo-blood walked by his side. She opened one of the back closets and shoved Karkat inside, along with the troll who had led him there.

The door slammed shut.

“What the fuck is going on?” said Karkat.

The troll didn’t answer. It was a girl, Karkat noticed, with short hair and curly horns. Probably of a lower caste, judging by her obedience, but not too low. The sound of her breathing was amplified in the darkness.

“What, you’re not going to talk to me?”

“I’m not supposed to say anything beyond what’s necessary,” she said. Her voice was high-pitched, but flat. Detached.

“What are you supposed to do, then?”

She cleared her throat quietly. Something made a quiet swish in the darkness. “I’m supposed to make you listen.”

Karkat snorted. “Sorry, but there’s no way in hell–”

A blade was pressed to his throat.

“It would be better if you listened,” the girl said, her monotone unchanged. Karkat drew a slow breath.

“You can’t threaten to kill me when I know there’s no way I’m making it out of here alive,” he said.

“Oh, I agree. But it’s not you that we’re threatening to kill.” She pressed the knife closer, so it stung Karkat’s skin. “It’s your friends. Maybe if you listen, we’ll have lenience.”

Karkat’s breathing grew shallower. He could feel the blade pressing closer to his neck with every pump of his bloodpusher. “I won’t tell you anything.”

The girl sighed. “Look. The one who was talking to you, Vennia, she just wants details. She already knows who and where your friends are. She doesn’t understand why they’d help you, though. Tell her your story. That’s all you need to do.”

“You’re bluffing,” Karkat snapped. “And I’m still not telling you shit. I don’t have some secret manipulation tactic, they’re just my fucking friends.”

“You’re wrong on both accounts.” The metal vanished from Karkat’s neck, and he breathed a sigh of relief, only to cry out in pain as the knife switched across his cheek. “You must have a little something more than the power of friendship if you survived so many sweeps without being culled. How did you make it through the trials? How did you survive without a lusus, why did the drones never detect you? These are the things Vennia needs to know. So we can prevent such a lapse ever happening again.”
“It was dumb luck,” Karkat growled. “Nothing more-- fuck!” His other cheek was cut, deeper this time.

“I wasn’t finished talking,” the girl whispered. “I was just getting to the good part.” The point of her knife danced across Karkat’s face, pressing down, then lifting and considering another spot. “I’m not bluffing. We know exactly who your friends are. Your squadron was led by Eridan Ampora, am I right?”

Karkat froze.

She continued, encouraged by Karkat’s sudden stillness. “With Vriska Serket and Terezi Pyrope, yes. Who else? Oh, the psionic one, what was his name? And, hmm-- Kanaya Maryam?”

“No,” Karkat mumbled. “You’re wrong.”

“You’re a terrible liar.” The knife point stopped needling at Karkat’s skin. “There are trackers in the helmets, stupid. As soon as we got permission from the higher-ups to use that data, we’ve known all their whereabouts.”

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He had given the Resistance helmets. If Karkat couldn’t reach Dave and tell him to destroy them, the revolution was doomed. How long would it be before these trolls realized what was right in front of them? All of his friends were in danger.

“You’ve been causing quite a lot of trouble. If your little rebellion gets any larger, we just might have to inform the higher-ups.” Karkat could feel the girl leaning in closer. “You wouldn’t want that, would you? I mean, fighting another squadron is one thing. You’ve gotten lucky when it came to your little skirmishes. But it’d take more than luck to take on the Condesce.”

“You’re going to kill them all no matter what I do,” said Karkat. “I’m still not telling you anything.”

She sighed. “You’re really not going to cooperate, huh? Oh, well. You’re pretty insignificant in the grand scheme of things. I was hoping to have more fun with you, but whatever. We’ll just send out a message to your buddies through Trollian and tell them to come save you so we can kill them all.”

Karkat’s glance nuggets widened. “Wait!”

Maybe there was still hope.

Sollux had cracked the firewall surrounding Trollian, but these people didn’t know that. They thought he could only contact members of his own squadron.

“Let me send the message,” he said. “It’ll be more convincing. If you let me do it, I’ll tell you whatever you want.”

The girl paused. “Whatever we want?”

“Yes.” Karkat hoped his plan would work. He doubted a repeated claim of luck would be what Vennia wanted to hear.

The door opened, and light poured in. Karkat winced in the sudden brightness. The girl was grinning. “I didn’t even need to draw much blood. All right, mutant. Send your little cry for help.
We’ll read it afterwards, so don’t try anything funny. Remember that we are much stronger than you.”

She exited the closet.

In a moment, she returned, looking impatient. “What are you waiting for?”

Karkat followed her to the pod’s central area, where the rest of the squadron was waiting. Vennia and the purple-blood who had first captured Karkat were muttering to each other. When the latter caught sight of Karkat, his eyes lit up.

“Ah, there you are. I’ve got a motherfuckin’ present for you.” He tossed a helmet to Karkat, who caught it and gave it a once-over. Confirming that it was indeed his own, he slipped it on.

He had to act quickly.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began trolling arsenicCatnip [AC] --

CG: DAVE?

CG: I NEED TO BE QUICK. LONG STORY SHORT THERE ARE TRACKERS IN THE HELMETS AND YOU NEED TO DESTROY THEM BEFORE ANYONE REALIZES THEY CAN FIND YOU.

CG: ALSO I’VE BEEN KIDNAPPED SO I NEED A LITTLE HELP.

AC: dude are you ok

CG: THERE’S NO TIME FOR THAT. I NEED YOU TO CONTACT GRIMAUXTIATRIX AND TELL HER ABOUT THE TRACKERS.

CG: SHE’S MY FRIEND, SHE’LL TELL THE REST OF MY SQUADRON. AFTER THAT, YOU NEED TO JOIN FORCES BEFORE YOU COME TO SAVE ME. NEITHER YOUR GROUP NOR THEIRS CAN DO IT ON THEIR OWN.

CG: I’M ABOUT TO SEND A CRY FOR HELP TO ONE OF THEM BUT MAKE SURE YOUR MESSAGE GETS THERE FIRST.

CG: DON’T RESPOND JUST FUCKING HURRY!!!

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased trolling arsenicCatnip [AC] --

Karkat could only hope that his kidnappers wouldn’t see that conversation. He began to leave another for them to find.

Just in case Dave’s message didn’t arrive fast enough, who would be the least likely to rush to his aid?

Ah, yes. How could he have forgotten.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began trolling arachnidsGrip [AG] --

CG: I’VE BEEN KIDNAPPED AND I NEED YOUR HELP.

AG: Well, well, well.
AG: Look who came crawling back.
AG: I can’t say I’m surprised. No offense, but you’re sort of helpless on your own.
CG: CAN YOU JUST COME AND SAVE ME PLEASE.
AG: Desperately? You’ve got a moirail to keep watch over you. Why are you dragging me into this????????
CG: …
AG: What? Do you expect me to be all welcoming? Since when have I ever
AG: …
AG: Oh. Hmmmmmmmmm.
AG: Okay, sure. We’ll come and get you as soon as we can. ::::)
CG: THANKS.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased trolling arachnidsGrip [AG] --

Dave must have reached her. And just in time, too—Karkat wasn’t sure how much more of the conversation he would have been able to stand.

“Hand it over, freak,” Vennia ordered. Karkat passed over the helmet. As she put it on and began to read, he prayed that she wouldn’t look beyond the most recent conversation.

She took the helmet off, looked at him, and burst out laughing. He held his breath.

“Damn, you really don’t have the nicest friends, do you? I might respect that girl if she wasn’t a fugitive.”

Fugitives. That was what his friends were, now, because of him. Karkat was too, of course, but he had always been on the run.

Maybe all of them had always been on the run.

They had known what they were getting into from the beginning, Karkat was sure. And they had chosen to be his friend anyway. They had willingly put themselves in danger for him, but he had never really realized it until now.

He had been having doubts as to whether they would cooperate with a group of humans, but those doubts began to fade. He had told Kanaya about Dave. She would explain everything, and after all, the two groups did share a common goal in rescuing Karkat. They would work together. They would come for him.

But they had to do it fast.

“Now.”

Karkat’s attention was snapped back to Vennia. She quirked an eyebrow.

“Are you ready to talk?”
He glanced around. No, he wasn’t ready, and he wouldn’t ever be. He needed a way out of this situation. He needed to stall.

He settled his expression into something insolent. “How come you’re acting like the boss? Last time I checked, the second highest blood color doesn’t get to be leader. They’re just the half-recognized second in command who doesn’t get shit for anything they do, no matter how hard they try to be whoever the leader is.”

Vennia’s face tinged indigo. “I said talk, not backtalk, you piece of hoofbeast shit. I can act however I damn please. That guy,” she jerked a finger in the direction of the purpleblood, “is stoned off his ass one hundred percent of the fucking time. You think they’d let someone of his caste lead a group unsupervised? No. They always put someone more… capable around, so they can take charge. I’m certainly the only one here who fits that description.” She stepped closer. “Now. Are you ready to talk?”

There was no more time for stalling. Karkat’s pan raced. He had to make up some kind of story, something believable.

“How did you make it through the caverns?” Vennia demanded. “The trials, how did you pass?”

“I cheated!” Karkat blurted.


“I had help,” said Karkat. He didn’t know what he was saying, or where it was coming from, but it seemed to be working. “I, uh. I made friends with a psionic. He didn’t know my blood color, and he wasn’t doing too well in the trials, so we both needed a way to pass. We found a malfunctioning drone and took it out. Then we used its data to help us cheat our way through the tests.”

That way would have been much easier than the terrifying, life-threatening way Karkat actually took. The way that required getting himself through the trials by skill alone, keeping his blood secret, and praying every day that his luck would hold… He had cheated a little, of course he had. He never would have made it otherwise. But it hadn’t been with any drone or yellowblood.

“This psionic. Was it Sollux Captor?” one of the trolls asked.

“No. No, it wasn’t. I never saw him again, I don’t know who it was,” Karkat said.

“Can you remember a name?”

“It might have started with an E.” Karkat shrugged. “It was a long time ago.”

“Uhh… How’d you all up and survive without a lusus?” the purpleblood slurried. Vennia glared at him. He seemed less lucid than he had the previous night, but still had some notion of what was going on. Perhaps it was intentional.

“I got a lusus,” said Karkat. This part came easier, seeing as it was true. “When we presented our blood colors, I just used someone else’s.”

Vennia seemed satisfied. Karkat surveyed the others. They all seemed excited, pleased by his little story. No doubt they were planning on reporting it to the Condesce and reaping the spoils of their ass-kissing.

But one of them was quiet. One of them was staring right at Karkat, and when he looked into her glance nuggets, he knew. She knew he was lying.
It was the same one who had taken him into the closet and threatened him with torture. What was her name again? Cairdi, he thought. Now that it was light, he could see that the symbol on her armor declared her a tealblood. That made sense. She was clearly bloodthirsty, and had a layer of suppressed insanity, but she was smarter than her superiors. She kept it hidden. Maybe she could keep this hidden, too.

“He’s lying,” she said quietly.

Oh god damnit.

“About what?” Vennia demanded.

“All of it,” said Cairdi, her voice just as dull as before. “That’s not how he got through the trials. He just got lucky.”

“What do you mean? The trials are-- they’re incredibly difficult! As it is, only the strongest make it through. There’s no way a mutant could have made it on his own!”

“Be that as it may, he’s lying.”

“I’m not lying,” Karkat protested. “I’m--”

Thud.

They all paused.

Thud.

The noise was coming from one side of the pod. As Karkat watched, he could see the wall shake, just barely, as something struck it from the other side.

“It seems that your friends have come to your rescue,” Vennia said sweetly. “It’s too bad they’ve walked straight into a trap.” She drew her blaster and adjusted the setting. “Would you like to watch the action, or are you the squeamish type?”

She approached the front window and looked out. Then, just as she began to move away, she looked back out.

“The hell?” she murmured.

She grabbed the helmsman’s shoulder, not looking away from the window. “How fast did we get here? Too fast to be followed, right? Then how…” She turned back to Karkat, her face furious. “You. You got to those humans of yours somehow. How did you do it?!”

“I didn’t do anything,” said Karkat.

“Liar!” Vennia snarled. “I should kill you for that, but I want to see you suffer first.” She lunged forward and grabbed him by his shirt collar. He stood, helpless, as she stared into his red eyes.

The hatch in the pod’s floor opened suddenly, and she tossed him straight to the ground.

Karkat landed hard. His nugbone collided with the concrete, and waves of blackness threatened to take him before his vision blinked back into focus. Pain stabbed through his limbs, coupled with a dull ache resonating throughout his pan.

“Get up,” Vennia spat. She grabbed his arm and tugged him upright. It felt like she pulled his arm
straight out of the socket, and Karkat swallowed a yelp of pain. It was difficult to focus, but he could make out his friends standing less than twenty feet away. Who was that? Terezi? And was that Roxy behind her?

Someone cried out in a language that was not Alternian. The language of Earth. What had it been called? English. It was so strange, yet it had become so familiar to Karkat. The voice was even more so.

It belonged to Dave.

What was he saying? Karkat looked all around, trying to locate the source of the cry. His friends were scattered all around, and constantly moving, which made the job harder.

There! There he was. Dave had stopped moving and was staring, enraged, at the captive Karkat. His sword was drawn and his stance was poised for battle. He looked ready to leap into a fray at any moment. Karkat felt his bloodpusher beat a little faster.

Just the nerves. After all, he was on the brink of being killed.

Dave repeated whatever it was he had said. Karkat wished he had spent more time trying to learn English. He could make out some pronouns in Dave's speech, and he got the gist of it, but it was annoying to have to rely on translation to fully understand.

Dave pointed to Karkat, then to himself. Then he raised his sword in Vennia’s direction.

“Humans,” she scoffed. “So adorable. You want to take me on, punk? Why don’t you try.”

Her blaster was raised in a split second, and a shot tore through the air towards Dave. Karkat’s lips parted in shock.

And then, time seemed to slow.

Dave’s knees bent, and he dropped to the ground, rolling gracefully back to his feet as the beam soared through the space he had formerly occupied. It happened in an instant, but he dodged with such a speed that made Vennia’s efforts seem sluggish. He dusted himself off and looked back up.

Karkat had forgotten what a good fighter Dave was. Somehow, it seemed less irritating now than it had when he had first discovered it. It was almost admirable.

Vennia scowled. “You think you’re so cool?” She snapped her fingers, glancing up at the pod. “What the hell are you all waiting for? Get down he--”

She jumped back as a bullet flew past her.

And that was Jade’s voice, yelling something else Karkat couldn’t comprehend. It must have been some kind of order, because suddenly, all was chaos.

He ripped his arm out of Vennia’s grip and dropped to the ground as a hail of bullets and blaster charges surged through the air. She staggered as one caught her side, then dropped down beside Karkat. Once her arms were secure around him, she stood back up.

“You shoot me, and you shoot him!” she screeched. Her squadron-mates dropped down beside her. Now, the two sides had a more even match, but they were still outnumbered.

“Let Karkat go,” called Eridan. “And we’ll leave you alone.”
Vennia’s expression was a strange composite of fury and disbelief. “Let him go?” She adjusted her position so her arm was around Karkat’s neck, holding him in a headlock. “Let him go? Never! He’s a mutant! I would think someone of your status would have better standards. You’re a highblood, you should know better than this! What’s your logic in defending him? You don’t gain anything by keeping him safe, so why are you bothering? It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Let him go,” Eridan repeated.

“What if I won’t?” Vennia sneered.

“Then we’ll have to do this the hard way.” He raised his blaster.

For a moment, Vennia eyed him suspiciously. Then she threw caution to the wind.

“Now!” she screamed.

Her teammates fired in unison, and for a moment, as the charges raced towards Eridan, it seemed that he wouldn’t dodge in time.

But just before they connected with his chest, they were enveloped in a flashing blue and red light.

Sollux stood in the back of the group. He bit his lip in concentration as the shots, now floating harmlessly in mid-air, redirected themselves towards Vennia’s team.

“If all other thquadronth are ath thtupid ath you, our rathe ith doomed,” he hissed.

All Vennia’s attempts at reclaiming power were in vain. Every shot she fired was absorbed into the mass of energy controlled by Sollux. As it slowly advanced, the confidence was wiped from her face. Her group had a psionic, too, of course, but he was busy at the helm. She knew she couldn’t win. But…

“I’ll never surrender to a pissblood like you,” she growled.

“Oh, that doethn’t matter,” Sollux said dismissively. “I wath going to kill you even if you did.”

The light grew brighter in a flash and surged forward with a blast of heat. Karkat felt Vennia’s grip on his neck loosen, and something fell to the ground with a thud.

He blinked. The afterimage of Sollux’s psionics was a heavy cloud over his vision. As he squeezed his glance nuggets shut, it began to fade, but just barely.

Something smacked into him, and his glance nuggets popped back open. “What the fu–”

“Are you okay?”

Dave’s voice was frantic as he placed his palms on Karkat’s cheeks. He swiped his thumbs across them as if checking for damage, then pulled the troll into a hug.

“Hi,” said Karkat, his voice softening. “Calm the fuck down, I’m fine.”

“I’ve never seen psychic powers in action before, can you blame me for being concerned?” Dave retorted. He pulled back. Now that Karkat’s safety was clear, his concern washed away into his typical grin. “So, these friends of yours. They’re a little psycho.”

“More than a little. They’re…” He looked over to his squadron. Kanaya had broken away from the other trolls and was hesitantly approaching. “Dave, could you give us a moment?”
“Sure.” Dave went back to rejoin the group of humans. They were separated from the trolls, and Karkat made a mental note to do some introductions later on.

“Karkat--” Kanaya began.

“Don’t say it,” Karkat interrupted. “I’ve been getting myself in trouble a lot lately, and I’ve been worrying you, and I’m sorry. But I’m going through a lot of shit. For example, I just found out that I’m half human, and I also happen to be descended from the Signless Sufferer. Isn’t that just fucking dandy. But I’ve worked through it in the way I needed to, and I’m done sneaking away now. We can be totally honest with each other. I’ve joined these humans to rebel against Alternia, and all I want is for you to join me.” He paused, searching Kanaya’s expression for forgiveness. “Would you?”

“Karkat,” she said, smiling. “What I was going to say was, of course we will.”
A Knight In Shining Armor

Chapter Summary

"And I wouldn't lie
I never really wanted more
Than what I ever really needed after all
Someone that hates to see me go"

-How It's Going To Be, Gerard Way

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK

well, sort of. here's the sitch: my personal life is actually insane right now and I still don't have my laptop. I'm writing from my phone (which is a terribly slow process) but I am writing, and I'll try to have my laptop back asap for quicker updates!

Until then, thank you all for your patience, and as always thank you for reading! :)

Karkat was still busy talking to his Alternian friends. After what seemed like an emotional moment with the short-haired girl, the others pounced on him and began chattering back and forth in their language. It was one thing to hear Karkat alone speaking in his native tongue, but with an entire host of rapidly-speaking aliens, Dave was hopelessly lost. It was interesting, of course, as he had never heard anything quite like the clicks and chirps that seemed to make up half of their language, but he did wish he could understand.

At least he wasn’t alone. All the humans were standing awkwardly off to the side, and at one point, Dave saw Jade and John make eye contact and try not to giggle. Their situation was a little ridiculous, he supposed. But he would give Karkat the time he needed. The troll had been through a lot.

And he really had been through a lot, now that Dave thought about it. His life had been one gigantic shitfest, but even setting that aside, the past day alone had packed a heavy punch. It seemed like everyone was trying to steal Karkat away and hold him far beyond Dave’s reach, but each time, the stars would align and they would snap back together. It was impossible to look past the present day in a life like Dave’s, but he hoped Karkat would continue to always find his way back.

And if he didn’t, Dave would come to bring him home.

Wait, what?

Dave was distracted from the odd implications of this thought as Karkat turned back to him. The troll seemed a little embarrassed.
“So… Did you get my message?”

“No, I just happened to get here at exactly the right moment,” said Dave. “Whenever you need me, I just magically appear. I’m awesome like that.”

“I meant the one about the helmets, stupid. We need to get rid of them.” Karkat glared at Roxy. “Did she finish the translators?”

“I can hear you, you know,” Roxy complained. “The rest of us have helmets on, too. You and Dave aren’t standing in your own little universe.”

Karkat flushed slightly. “Did you finish the translators?” he asked, this time addressing Roxy directly.

“As a matter of fact, I did.” Beneath her visor, Roxy was beaming. “I can bring out my laptop right now if you want!” She turned, but Karkat held up a hand.

“Wait, I’ve got to introduce you guys.”

He motioned for the groups of humans and trolls to get closer to each other. “You’re all separated. We can’t take this rebellion anywhere if you just stand around like a bunch of awkward shitheads, not even talking. Get your fucking sociable on.”

Kanaya was the first to say anything. “Hello,” she said cautiously. “Karkat has told me much about you all, and from his accounts, it would be difficult not to judge you as a most kind and brave company. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go so far to praise us,” said Rose. “We are nothing more than a group of people who decided that, no, the idea of our race and planet being decimated was less than preferable.”

“Oh, really?” Dave couldn’t tell for sure, due to Kanaya’s foreign language, but he thought he detected a layer of interest in her voice. It was mirrored by a growing smirk on Rose’s face. “I agree with this description, but you are too modest. Overall, your actions have been heroic and more than-”

“Kanaya,” Karkat interrupted. “If you’re going to flirt, wait to exchange one sentence first.”

Kanaya blushed bright green. “Karkat, I am simply making an introduction.”

“An introduction to your red quadrant, more like,” he snickered.

Kanaya cleared her throat, pointedly ignoring Karkat’s statement. “Shall we move on?”

Dave wished that she would retaliate. Karkat had clearly been joking about something romantic, but what the hell was a quadrant? The question had been eating away at him ever since the brief conversation he had had with Karkat. Discussing it had seemed to make Karkat uncomfortable, so he hadn’t pressed, but the feeling that he had done something wrong persisted.

“Please,” said one of the other trolls, rolling her eyes. Karkat looked at her.

“Care to go next?”

She sighed, her glossy blue lips forming a perfect pout. “My name’s Vriska.” She tossed her hair to the side and offered no further conversation.

“Well then,” said Karkat, disgruntled. “Next?”
A troll with pointy red glasses and a smile full of teeth stepped up. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but then rushed forward and dragged her tongue across John’s face.

“Ew, what the hell?” he yelped. “I don’t want to be insensitive about your culture or anything but that was really freaking gross!”

“Terezi!” Karkat snapped. “We all know you’re socially pan-dead, but can you please restrain your inner creep for one goddamn second?”


Karkat sighed. “Why did I think this was a good idea? I’ll sum the rest up quick. That’s Eridan, Sollux, and Nepeta.”

Dave paused. “Nepeta? Isn’t that the one who...”

The small troll Karkat had pointed to looked up at Dave in confusion. “I... I think I know mew!”

Dave coughed, finally recognizing her for who she was. “Yeah. I, uh, knocked you out one time.”

“Wait, what?” Karkat looked at him in alarm. “You mentioned that you knew each other, but how exactly did you meet? What's this about fighting?”

“I was walking down the street and she jumped me, so I clocked her and stole her helmet,” said Dave. He scratched the back of his head. “Uh, sorry about that.”

“No, it was my fault,” she said. “I was just trying to prove to my squadron that I was strong enough to be with them. When I woke up, they had left me behind, but that was for the better. Without you, I never would have found my furiends!” She smiled.

“And there’s a good chance we wouldn’t have been able to rescue Karkat,” said Dirk.

“Why don’t you do introductions for your group?” Karkat whispered to Dave, who nodded.

“Well, I’m Dave. That right there is Rose. There’s John and Jade, followed by Dirk and Roxy. And finally we have Jake and Jane.”

“It is an honor to finally meet you,” Kanaya smiled.

Karkat waited a moment, then took off his helmet. “Introductions are over. It’s time to get rid of these,” he ordered. “Anybody got a--”

Dave tossed him a blaster before he could finish his sentence. He nodded in gratitude, then flung down his helmet.

Dave started to remove his, but his action was interrupted by a sudden outcry from one of the other trolls. “Wait! How are we going to understand each other without thehe?”

The words showed up normally on Dave’s visor, but there seemed to be something off about the troll’s pronunciation. Was that a… lisp?

Whatever. Lisp or no lisp, the 3-D glasses meant this guy was cool in Dave’s book.

“Roxy developed a new kind of translation software,” said Karkat. “We should be fine with that. But if we really need to, we can steal their helmets.” He pointed to the fallen bodies of the trolls who had kidnapped him. There was a moment of silence.
“Plus, maybe Sollux or Dirk can find a way to get the trackers out,” he added. Sollux, that was the name of the lisping troll. “Then we can use Roxy’s thing for convenience, and the helmets would be safe if we ever need to say something really fast.”

“I’ll go get my laptop,” Roxy offered. She took off her helmet and set it on the ground next to Karkat’s before walking off. One by one, each member of the groupset theirs in a growing pile. When Roxy came back, she held a computer under her arm, and she stopped before the pile to witness as it was fired upon.

The helmets were unsurprisingly blaster-proof, but they didn’t seem immune to human weaponry. Jade’s bullets could crack them in a few hits, and it wasn’t long before Jake suggested adding gunpowder to the mound. He ran into the humans’ pod, and while Dave had previously been unaware that they even carried gunpowder, apparently they did. Perhaps he should have a talk about fire safety with Jake.

Once the helmets were suitably dusted with powder, everyone stood back. Jade shot into the pile, and it went up in flames with only a small explosion. Terezi murmured something that sounded like an expression of awe.

“Time to get this going,” said Roxy, opening her laptop. “I’ve set it up so it works from this computer and can be downloaded onto any device. I know most of us humans have phones, but what about you?” She looked expectantly to the trolls, then giggled. “Oh. Right.” She repeated her question into the computer, and it gave the Alternian translation aloud.

Kanaya said something, and a moment later it was repeated: “That is a truly astonishing innovation on your part.”

Karkat mumbled something to her, but he kept his voice quiet enough that only part of it was picked up. “Not as st… you thought… huh?”

Dave thought he got the gist, and raised an eyebrow at Karkat in mock offense.

The troll with the horrendous fashion sense, (good god, Dave could hardly stand to look at that cape), informed Roxy that they lacked mobile devices, and she frowned. “Well. That puts a bit of a damper on my plans. But…” She grinned. “I believe it’s a fixable problem. Is everyone up for raiding a phone store?”

“Is it the wisest idea to give them human technology?” Rose said skeptically. “Smartphones are surprisingly complex instruments, you must remember.”

“So are these helmets, but we got the hang of them quick. They’ll be fine! As soon as my translators are installed, everything will make perfect sense.”

Roxy allowed the computer to tell Karkat’s friends of her plan, and they seemed satisfied. “Come on, let’s go!” She led them to the pod belonging to the Resistance. “Home sweet home.”

There was a lot less room inside with seven extra passengers. Dave was left sitting on the floor, but Karkat was next to him, so he didn’t really mind. The humans and trolls seemed to be keeping to their own races, but there was some intermingling. Terezi wouldn’t stop pestering John, and Rose and Kanaya had borrowed Roxy’s computer to have an immersive conversation. Dave didn’t bother listening in. Their exchanges of culture would probably be half-interrogation, half-flirtation, and that wasn’t something he wanted to witness.

However, after a few minutes, they took a pause to address their peers. “While these translators will
help us greatly, I believe it would be a worthwhile practice to begin learning each other’s languages,” said Rose. Kanaya repeated the message in Alternian. “Karkat, you know some measure of English, I can tell,” Rose continued. “Would you be willing to assist in teaching?”

Karkat shifted, growing a little closer to Dave. Dave wasn’t sure if it was on purpose or not. His reply was in Alternian, but Dave could tell it wasn’t exactly a positive. The computer affirmed this, with: “I don’t know enough English to be a good teacher. I dunno.”

“That may be true, but you do know enough to assist your friends with the basics,” Rose said. “Would you give it a try?”

Karkat sighed, not needing a translation. This time, his reply was in English. “Fine.”

Dave felt himself smile. Karkat was making progress. His minimal speech was accented in the most adorable way, but he--

Wait, what was that?

Dave hurriedly looked back over to Rose, but his eyes slid over to Kanaya to find that she was giving him an odd look. Once she noticed him looking back, she immediately averted her gaze. His eyebrows raised. What was up with her?

“Let’s get going first,” Jade said worriedly. “I don’t want to hang around this place too long after that fight.”

Karkat nodded and gave the word to the helmsman. With a slight lurch, they took off. Dave didn’t bother to ask where they were going. Anywhere but where they were was fine with him.

Rose began organizing groups to teach lessons to each other, and in the organization process, Kanaya slipped over to Dave and Karkat.

She and the latter began whispering back and forth, and Dave was forced to awkwardly sit in silence. He listened to every word, but couldn’t understand a bit. Unless… No.

He could understand some of it.

It was in a hazy way, more of recognizing repeated symbols and vague associations than fluent understanding. But he could gauge that they were talking about Karkat, and probably the danger he had been in. There was a tenderness in Kanaya’s eyes that spoke of love and concern.

For some reason, it was making Dave uncomfortable.

She held Karkat’s hand in her lap, and the two never spared a glance to Dave. He began to wonder if it would matter if he got up and joined another group. He should do that. Karkat and Kanaya needed their space to do whatever it is they were doing, and--

Did she just kiss his cheek?

Kanaya leaned back, and Dave’s heart dropped into his stomach. She looked up at him, and they had a moment of terrible, agonizing eye contact. He fought to keep his expression blank. Then, as if nothing had happened, she resumed her conversation with Karkat.

This time, Dave thought he caught his name.

He stood up. It would be better for him to talk to Rose or John. They were his own species, and he’d
spent much less time trying to befriend them than Karkat. He clearly had some misaligned priorities. Karkat and Kanaya could get caught up on their obviously romantic relationship, and Dave would be bonding with his other friends. No problem.

Why did he feel like there was a problem?

***

“Hello,” Nepeta said uncertainly. “My... name is Nepeta?”

“That’s very good!” Jade said excitedly. She also gave a thumbs up, in case the message didn’t get across. Then she cleared her throat. “My turn. Umm...”

Her attempt to replicate Alternian was less successful. Nepeta giggled as she listened. Dave almost smiled, but he was still feeling off, somehow. Not that anyone noticed. Not even Karkat noticed. After all, he was busy.

“My turn!” said John. So far, he was the worst at speaking Alternian among all the humans. “I’m gonna do it this time. Okay.” He concentrated hard. When he spoke, his voice was lower than usual, but not quite as scratchy as the language was meant to sound. He threw up his hands after only a few words. “I give up! I can’t make my tongue do that stuff.”

“Stupid,” Terezi sniggered. It seemed as though she had grown proficient in English only to spite John. Insults were her specialty, (though, of course, all the trolls had been excited to learn how to swear in English. It seemed that some things were universal).

“Terezi,” Karkat said wearily. The computer picked up on his speech and translated it automatically. “If I need to place a groupwide ban on flirting of any quadrant, so help me god, I will.”

There was that phrase again. “Quadrants.” It was beginning to crop up often, especially in reference to Karkat scolding Rose and Kanaya. Each time someone was berated for flirting, Dave grew more curious, and more worried.

“Dude?” he asked. “What is a quadrant, anyway?”

“Yeah! I'd been wondering the same thing,” said John. Rose nodded.

“I'm sure we all share this curiosity.”

The other humans chimed in their agreement, but none of them seemed to register with Karkat. His eyes were fixed to the floor. He radiated discomfort, but before Dave could say anything, he began speaking. He spat the words out quickly, as if to get it over with, causing a brief lag between his speech and the translation.

“I should've known this would come up eventually. Quadrants are, uh... Alternia’s romantic structure, I guess. I watched a lot of Earth films while I was on my way here, and it took me a while to figure out why you only seemed to have one. I can see why you'd be confused. I actually forgot about it for a while... It's so weird that you don't have them that I just went back to assuming you did... Well, no. I think I made myself forget.” Was it Dave's imagination, or did Karkat briefly look up at him before averting his gaze?

“So, there are four quadrants, obviously. Each one represents a different type of romance. They're all essential to Alternian society. The first is the red quadrant.” This time, he really did look up. “Does anyone have a pen?” Everyone shook their heads. “Whatever. I don't think you need to see the symbols to understand. The red quadrant is the one you have, I think. People who are in a red
relationship are in love with each other. Just think of your human relationships, and that's basically it.”

Karkat placed his hand on Kanaya’s shoulder. “The next is the pale quadrant. Two trolls in a pale relationship are… They’re essentially each other's caregivers. They don’t show affection the same way matesprits do, but they're very close. A lot of the time you’ll see a highblood in a moiraillegiance with a lowblood. The highblood provides for the lower blood, and the lower keeps the higher from doing crazy stuff.”

“Matesprits?” Rose said curiously.

“People in a red relationship,” Karkat clarified. “And two pale trolls would be moirails.”

Rose’s brow furrowed. “I don’t quite understand. To me, your description of a moiraillegiance just sounds like a particularly close friendship.”

“Yeah, I guess they're similar concepts for you. When I watched your movies I initially thought you had a pale quadrant. Friendships are different on Earth and Alternia, though. I think your definition encompasses more than ours.” Karkat lowered his voice to a stage whisper. “Don’t worry, though, I'm no threat to you. Kanaya still totally wants into your red quadrant.”

Kanaya blushed and slapped him, but did not deny his claim.

Rose didn’t look completely convinced. Dave was in a similar state of confusion. So Karkat and Kanaya were in a relationship after all… but it was a kind of relationship that would be considered platonic on Earth, and romantic on Alternia? It was an odd concept to wrap his head around, and he wasn’t sure he was comfortable with it. But then again, he wasn’t sure why it mattered.

“The other main quadrant is black,” said Karkat. “It’s when two people hate each other romantically.”

“Okay,” John interjected. “I can see your platonic-romantic thing, kind of. But how do you hate someone romantically?”

Karkat scowled. “I don't know, you just do. It's not actual hate. Well… it is, but it's different from normal hate. It usually starts with being really pissed off by each other's existence, and then over time, if you're serious, it can develop into real hatred.”

“That seems plausible,” Rose said. “Strange, perhaps, from an Earthling’s point of view, but the concept is not completely unfamiliar. Even in our culture, there does tend to be a certain type of… tension between rivals.”

“You said there were four, what's the last one?” Dirk asked.

“Ashen,” Karkat answered. “The thing is, a lot of trolls get pissed at each other’s existence, but nobody likes a cheating kismesis. Let's say there's a couple in a fierce black relationship, troll A and troll B. However, troll A starts to have pitch inclinations towards someone else, troll C. An auspistice can step in and be the mediator between trolls A and C, so nobody ends up getting butthurt.”

“That one doesn't seem as emotional,” Jade noted. “It’s just keeping two people from getting into a relationship that's bad for them?”

“Yes, that is the basic concept, but it is much more exhausting than it sounds,” Kanaya said, grimacing. “Auspisticing is an incredible responsibility, and one I have been saddled with more times than I can count. Often times an ashen intervention is the only way to keep a group from falling into
social chaos.”

“You have a rather extensive romantic history, then?” asked Rose, the corners of her mouth playing at a smile. “It makes one wonder at your capabilities. You must be quite the charmer.”

“I assure you, ashen dealings are the farthest thing from charming,” said Kanaya. “But…” Her tone became more delicate. “I am sure I would be suited to the practice of charm, should an opportunity ever arise.”

“Gross,” Terezi complained. “Why are we talking about this, anyway?”

“Becauthe Karkat geth overly exhited every time thomeone mentionth quadrantth,” Sollux grumbled.

“They asked,” Karkat snapped. “And I answered. Don't try and make me sound obsessed.”

“Oh, not obthethed, are we? Thayth the guy with hundredth of thitty romanthe filmth piled up in hith rethpiteblock--”

“Okay, at this point you're just being an asshole and derailing the conversation,” said Karkat, glaring at Sollux. “What were we talking about again?”

“I think we were pretty much done,” said Vriska. She punctuated her statement with an exaggerated yawn.

“Let's just make fun of Karkat now!” Terezi sniggered. “That's always fun. Oh, does anyone remember the time he was dancing to the Thresh Prince theme song when he thought nobody was watching?”

Karkat gave her an even fiercer look. His face was turning red with anger, and his lips were pursed tight, causing his crimson cheeks to puff out slightly. Dave took one look at him and burst out laughing.

“Don't fucking laugh! This was an important exchange of culture and they're ruining it!” Karkat sputtered. “This is-- hey,” he pointed to Terezi, “she's the one who sings in the ablution trap!”

“Yes, but I don't get embarrassed about it,” Terezi pointed out. “And my face doesn't screw up every time someone makes fun of me.”

Karkat looked furious, but Dave thought he could detect a layer of hurt in the troll’s expression. Maybe he should have contained his laughter.

“Oh, leave him alone,” he and Kanaya said in unison.

For a second, they looked at each other in surprise. Neither of them said anything. Dave had no clue what she could be thinking, but there was a strange tension in the air.

“Shall we continue our language lesson?” Rose broke in.

“Yes, let's,” said Kanaya gratefully. She cleared her throat. Letting go of Karkat’s hand, she took the computer back and began to type in new commands. “Let's work on battle vocabulary…”

And as she tapped away at the keys, she subtly lifted a hand and gave Karkat the lightest push towards Dave.

God, trolls were confusing.
That Awkward Moment

Chapter Summary

"From the get-go, I knew this was hard to hold
Like a crash, the whole thing spun out of control
Oh, on a wire, we were dancing
Two kids, no consequences
Pull the trigger without thinking
There's only one way down this road"

-Time Bomb, All Time Low

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Karkat and Kanaya lay nestled by the wall. It had been several hours since the other trolls passed out, taken instantly by sleep after slathering on copious amounts of sopor. The humans had drifted off not long after. Karkat, however, had waited, with Kanaya following suit. While everyone slept soundly, they were finally free to talk in private.

Although their conversation turned out to be one Karkat was decidedly uncomfortable with, he did relish the opportunity to sit and cuddle in peace.

“Surely you must see it by now,” Kanaya said, combing her fingers through Karkat’s hair.

“No, I actually don’t,” he said.

Kanaya paused. “His feelings for you are entirely obvious. Did you see the way he reacted to us earlier? And to our explanation of quadrants?”

Karkat pursed his lips. “Dave is… Look, you’re reading too far into it. He doesn't like me like that.”

“I assure you, he does.” Kanaya’s tone became businesslike. She checked off items on her fingers as she spoke. “He began acting oddly as soon as I began to display affection towards you. He clearly cares for you, judging by the way he reacted when you were reunited. He defended you when you were being teased. Karkat, for someone so concerned with romance, you are being remarkably dense. Dave is flushed for you.”

“No he’s not,” Karkat snapped. “‘Flushed’ doesn’t exist for humans. Their romance is different, remember? We just discussed this.”

Kanaya went quiet for a minute. Her cool fingers traced a pattern into his cheek. Her silence was so prolonged that Karkat almost thought she had gone to sleep, but she finally broke it with a gentle voice. “Perhaps you should stop looking at things as being so black and white.”

“What do you mean?”

Kanaya shrugged. “You are going to great lengths to categorize your feelings, and Dave’s, too. Why not just let things happen? Earth doesn’t have a strict red quadrant... But does that really matter?”
Karkat looked at her in disbelief. “Kanaya, of course it matters. The feelings involved, I mean, just the difference of cultural norms, it’s too much. You can’t just smash together two people from different planets and expect it to work.” He scowled. “Didn't you hear it earlier? The humans thought moiraillegiance was the same thing as friendship. It wouldn't work. He’s too… human.”

“You are human, too,” Kanaya said softly.

Karkat bristled. “So? We were still raised in completely different environments! It doesn't matter if I’m part human, because my personality is a hundred percent fucking Alternian. My standards are Alternian. You can’t be in a relationship where you’re both acting in a way that’s normal for your species, but not for the other! It just wouldn’t work!”

“Shh. Lower your voice,” said Kanaya. Karkat clamped his mouth shut, casting a guilty look over at his sleeping friends.

After a moment of silence, Kanaya nodded. “It is true that any relationship between you two would take work, but I believe you are capable of it. Your personality is not ‘a hundred percent Alternian.’ You have a strong portion of humanity within you, but you have been denying it.”

Karkat sighed. “Why are you… You seem like you’re trying to convince me to get with him,” he said, frustrated. “Why? How can you be so chill, aren’t you jealous? Don’t you think all this is weird?”

“I would never pressure you to do anything,” Kanaya said. She resumed gently stroking Karkat’s hair. “But I do think it could be healthy for you. You need to open up the parts of you that you keep so closely guarded, Karkat. Not even I know all the secrets you act as if you do not keep. I believe Dave may be the key to helping you. You already act in a way around him that is different from how you act around anyone else, even me.” Kanaya pressed a finger to Karkat’s lips before he could apologize. “Shh. I am not jealous. Dave is not pale for you, not really, so I would not have the right to be. Human feelings transcend categorization. You are capable of those same feelings, if you only recognized them for what they are. And even if he was pale for you, I would wish for you to do whatever makes you happiest.”

“Kanaya, I don't even like him. I… I did have a black thing for him, before, I can’t deny that. But that’s gone now. It’s gone, and there’s nothing left.”

Kanaya smiled.

“Are you sure?”

Karkat unwillingly glanced over to where Dave lay sleeping. The human was curled into a ball, his sword in one hand, his omnipresent sunglasses still concealing his eyes. The sunglasses didn’t annoy Karkat as much as they used to. Honestly, none of the things that used to infuriate him mattered now. It had been a brief hatecrush guiding his thoughts, nothing more, nothing less. Pitch inclinations had come and gone, and that chapter of Karkat’s life was over.

His glance nuggets remained fixed on Dave, but at this point, he was just staring into space. Thinking was taking up all his energy. Karkat knew that, in terms of quadrants, he could say with complete certainty that he didn’t like Dave. But Kanaya’s question floated around ceaselessly in his pan.

Beyond quadrants…

Beyond quadrants, his answer became confused.
When Kanaya spoke of it, the concept made no sense. How could romantic feelings not be divided into four? But when Karkat looked at Dave, it seemed like maybe, just maybe, it was a plausible idea.

“I’m sure,” said Karkat.

It sounded less like an answer, and more like he was trying to convince himself.

***

“Good morning!” Nepeta sang. Out of all the trolls, she had embraced English the most readily, and now peppered it into her every conversation. She had even gone so far as to refuse to use the translator. Full immersion, she called it. The humans found this delightful. Karkat found it fucking annoying, but it was also kind of helpful, because as much as he resented it, he really did need to start speaking fluently, and though Nepeta often fumbled for the meaning of a word, she did seem to be learning faster than anyone else.

Karkat’s morning had begun with a shaking from Terezi, who had no trouble resorting to roughness in order to wake someone up. This was evident in John’s case. When shaking didn’t work, a tongue sliding across his forehead did the trick quite nicely, and he woke straight into a bad mood. Karkat wished the pod wasn’t so infected with romance. It was beginning to grate on his nerves more than usual.

Now, the whole group had gathered for a morning meeting. Karkat didn’t know how there could be anything more to do than fight the Condesce, but there certainly was.

Nepeta said something in English. Even to Karkat’s untrained auricular sponge clot it sounded broken. She sighed, clearly growing frustrated, and bit her lip as she thought on the right word. After a minute, she gave up, reaching for the laptop Kanaya held at the ready.

She read the translation aloud in both English and Alternian.

“Hi, efurybody! I want to take this time to bring up something very important. I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and I’ve decided that it’s time we did something.” She looked around to make sure she had everyone’s attention before continuing. “Befur all this crazy stuff happened, there were more of us trolls in this furiend group. Twelve, to be exact! We were separated when we were divided into squadrons to fight. Though most of us got back together again, there are still a few people missing. I managed to find a couple of them a while ago, but we just got separated again! When we aren’t fighting, I think we should be looking for them.”

Vriska groaned. “I had hoped you’d forgotten about that.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Nepeta said, indignant. “I’ve been messaging them ever since Sollux broke down the firewall.”

“I’m thtill trying to get to FF,” said Sollux. Sure enough, his glance nuggets were glued to the palmhusk in his hand. The dark yellow shadows hanging beneath his glasses made it look like he hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in weeks. “I think I’m almotht there.”

Now that Karkat thought of it, Sollux had been the last one to sleep the previous night. At the time, Karkat had been annoyed, wanting him to rest so he could talk to Kanaya. He hadn’t really thought about what Sollux was doing.

“Oh my goodness,” Kanaya said, concerned. “Have you been working on that this entire time? You look exhausted.”
He didn't answer, choosing instead to silently type away, dismissing her without a word. Nepeta cleared her throat.

“Well, Equius and Aradia are together, and they said they could make their way to us. Gamzee and Tavros will be a little harder. Gamzee has to lead an entire squadron… If he abandons them, it’ll only draw more attention to us.”

“He could just kill them,” Vriska suggested.

“Are you stupid?” Karkat snapped. Then, feigning surprise, he clapped a hand to his forehead. “Oh, of course you are. Sorry. I try so hard to forget the fucking disaster that is your existence, sometimes things just slip through the cracks.” He glared at her. “Are we thinking of the same Gamzee? Gamzee Makara would never kill his squadron. He’s too hopped up on sopor to form an intelligent thought, much less kill anyone. And besides, he wouldn’t want to.”

“Then we kill them for him. Problem solved,” said Vriska.

“I’m sure we’ll figure something out,” Nepeta interrupted. “But the real issue is Tavros. He’s in a squadron by himself. He’s barely surviving as he is, he can’t escape on his own. We’re going to have to go to him or--”

“Or we could just leave him there and never involve ourselves with him again,” Vriska finished.

“No!” Karkat said angrily. “He may be a worthless pile of crap, but we’re rescuing him on principle. We’re in this shit together. No matter our specific brain capacity, we’re sticking together because we’re a fucking team, and that means nobody gets left behind. Plus, his talking to animals schtick could actually be useful.”

“Oh, yes,” Nepeta said, evidently displeased. “That sure was a great pep talk, Karkat. Way to bring the team together.”

Dave tapped him on the shoulder. He said something Karkat couldn’t quite make out, but it ended with “talk slower.” Nepeta rushed to translate their conversation and bring the humans up to speed, then Rose kept the computer in her lap so she could follow along in real time. Once they were informed of the situation, Jade began to object. Everyone began arguing at once, and Karkat felt his blood heat to a boil.

“Everybody shut the fuck up!” he shouted. “Here’s the plan. Nepeta, tell Aradia and Equius to rescue Tavros before they meet up with us. We’ll deal with Gamzee once that’s over, then find some way to save Feferi. Until then, we stay fucking focused. This isn’t just about us. It’s about fighting back. If we get distracted, we’ll end up dead!”

“He’s right,” Kanaya nodded. “We cannot allow ourselves to be caught off guard. Our primary objective is fighting. We will make time for activities that allow us to keep doing so, but anything else is a lower priority.”

Rose cleared her throat. “Speaking of which, we need to retrieve new ammunition. We’re going through it fast. And Jade, you said something about cleaning your gun?”

Jade nodded. “I don’t want it to start jamming. We need to allocate some time to take care of our weapons.”

Roxy tapped Rose on the shoulder to say something. Rose repeated her complaint in Alternian. “We do seem to be communicating exclusively in your language. Perhaps we should give English a turn?”
Whatever,” Karkat grumbled. He wracked his pan for the words he needed. He knew how to say “we,” and “supplies,” and “fight,” after their impromptu vocabulary lesson the previous day. He hesitated before addressing Dave.

“We get stuff for fight. Okay?”

Dave responded with a fist bump, so Karkat figured he had done all right. His speech clearly wasn’t perfect, but at least it was understandable.

“Let’s go over a checklist!” Nepeta said brightly. “We need ammo, medical supplies, what else? Oh! Roxy said those of us who don’t have palmhusks should get some, right?” She glanced at Roxy. “Get phones?”

Roxy gave a thumbs up, so Nepeta continued. “We definitely need more food meow that there are so many of us… I can’t think of anything else we need, though. Is that it?”

“I have a suggestion,” Eridan mumbled. “A new pod, maybe? We could definitely do with a vehicle that isn’t held together by strips of tape and wishful thinking.”

Nepeta paused a moment, looking thoughtful. “Well, it’s clearly something we’re going to need sooner or later… The real question is if we want to draw more attention to ourselves by hijacking a mew one.”

Terezi shrugged. “Like you said, it’ll happen sooner or later. Why not now? It’d be better to get a new one and be ready for whatever they throw at us instead of waiting in this piece of junk.”

“That is correct,” Nepeta said with approval. “What does everyone else think?”

Rose read off the English translation from her computer screen. The humans didn’t seem to have any objection, and none of the trolls did, either.

“Okay! Let’s go on a supply run first, then, and track down a new pod after. We can assign different people to get different things. Hmm… Each of you take a helmet so you can communicate before we get our palmhusks. Who wants to lead the medical team?”

The group began to split into several smaller groups, each with an assigned task. Jane volunteered to search for medical supplies, Eridan for ammunition, and Roxy for technology.

“Dave, John, Karkat, why don’t you get food?” Kanaya asked. Karkat glared daggers at her, but could not object, as John clapped his hands together at the prospect.

“Whatever you think you’re doing, it’s not as helpful as you think it is,” Karkat hissed in Alternian.

“Perhaps,” Kanaya replied smoothly. “But you may not continue to hold that viewpoint. Now, out.” She ushered an indignant Karkat and his teammates from the pod. They slid down to the ground and the trapdoor closed behind them.

“So, where do we get food?” Karkat grumbled, switching to English. He shoved the helmet down over his hair. He was apprehensive to use it, since the tracker still had not been removed… But as long as he only used it sparingly, it should be a safe move. Probably. He used the map feature to bring up an image of the city they were in.

Of course, it made no sense to him, as he still wasn’t quite familiar with human mapping techniques. He passed it off to Dave.
"This way," Dave said after only a few minutes of map-reading. He beckoned John and Karkat to follow him off down the street. Karkat could see Kanaya heading in the opposite direction, and gave her a sarcastic wave.

When he turned back, Dave looked away from him a little too quickly.

After that, they spent most of the trip in silence. John attempted to start up a conversation several times, but his efforts were ineffective. There was too much tension for Karkat to act casual. He didn’t know why it was tense, and he sure as hell didn’t want it that way, but he didn’t know how to fix it.

By the time they had reached their destination, he had had enough. He lightly punched Dave in the shoulder. “What’s wrong? You’re acting weird.”

“No, I’m not.” Dave entered the food store without holding the door open for Karkat, who frowned and hurried after.

“Yeah, that totally made me believe you and wasn’t dodgy as hell. What’s up? Did I do something?”

“Did-- did you do something?” Dave looked at him in disbelief. “No, man. You… no.” He glanced at John, who was walking a short distance behind them and looking to all the world as someone who was feeling extremely awkward and trying to pretend they weren’t. “Can we not do this right now?”

Karkat sighed. “Whatever. I just want to sort shit out. You’ve been acting really fucking off ever since yesterday.” He had probably gotten weirded out by Alternia’s concepts of romance, Karkat thought to himself. Kanaya had been totally wrong. Dave wasn’t jealous; he just thought Karkat was a freak.

That seemed like the more plausible option, at least. Karkat still refused to believe that Dave could have anything more in his pump biscuit than bland feelings of friendship for him.

Dave didn’t answer. Instead, he said something to John that Karkat couldn’t understand, and the two of them headed down an aisle, leaving Karkat behind. Great. Well, if they were going to be exclusive, he didn’t care. He would get more food than the two of them combined, and it would taste better, too. Dave was his friend, so, why not strike up a little friendly competition?

He realized that this plan might have a flaw or two as he looked through the shelves, completely unsure of what was edible and what wasn’t.

Whatever. Karkat would find a way. He grabbed a bunch of items at random, collecting them until his arms could hold no more. A glance down the aisle told him that there was a lot more to be gathered, however, so he took off his helmet and shoved some of the food into it to make more room. Then he took off in the direction Dave and John had left.

As he ran, he caught a glimpse of them, walking around with some kind of metal basket. *Fuck.* That was a way better method of carrying food. Where had they gotten it?

Karkat cut into the next aisle over so he wouldn’t be seen, then headed back to the front of the store. Near the entrance were several rows of the contraptions Dave and John had pushed. Karkat dumped his collection into one, then pulled it from its place and wheeled it back into the middle of the store. He had lost his head start. Now he would have to work extra hard if he was going to win this competition of culinary supremacy and impress--

*No, not impress Dave, stupid. You’re doing this for fun. Fun and friendship.*

He would have to take a more sensible approach. Thus far, he had been grabbing items at random,
which probably wouldn’t do him much good. He had to approach this systematically. He couldn’t bring anything perishable… Humans had canned food, right? When meal times came around, Karkat had mostly stuck to whatever Alternian rations were available, but he thought he remembered seeing the humans eat from cans. The only question was, where were they kept? He ended up wandering through the endless rows, pretending to know what he was doing in case he was seen by Dave or John.

Ah, there they were! Karkat hurried up to an entire shelf of cans. A lot of them looked the same, and their labels didn’t do a good job describing their contents, taking into account that he couldn’t read them. It looked like random action was the way to go after all. He grabbed a few of each label and dropped them into his basket with a clatter.

“Karkat?”

Karkat froze at the sound of Dave’s voice. When he straightened up, he tried his best to act casual, putting on his helmet to be understood.

“Oh, hi. I’ve just been getting some stuff, what have you been doing?” Fuck, that had sounded better in his pan. Great. Real smooth, Karkat.

“Uh, we’ve been getting stuff, too.” Dave sidled up to Karkat’s basket. “Whatcha got?” He pulled out a couple of cans. He and John took a moment to look them over, then busted out laughing. Karkat bristled.

“What is it?”

Dave swallowed a giggle. “Karkat, this is dog food. We can’t eat this.”

“Well—” John interrupted.

“No, dude, we are not taking it, I don’t care if it’s technically edible,” Dave said, rolling his eyes. “Sorry, Karkat. We should’ve stayed with you.”

Karkat’s face burned with embarrassment. He had lost the contest, fair and square, but that didn’t make it sting any less. Especially since it hadn’t even been a contest. He had been the one to make it competitive, trying to prove himself and only managing to look like an idiot. But, perhaps there was still hope. Maybe Dave was just being picky.

“But… Didn’t John just say we could eat it?” Karkat indicated the can. “What’s wrong with it?”

Dave shook his head, wincing. “Sorry, forgot you don’t have dogs. Domesticated animals, dude. That stuff’s not for people.”

“Oh.” Well, there went any shot at redemption. Karkat started taking the cans out of his basket and shoving them back onto the shelves, not even caring if they were placed correctly. It wasn’t like it mattered. The only people shopping here were scavengers like them, and they would be smart enough to know what they could fucking eat and what they couldn’t.

Dave grabbed his arm. “Hey. Why don’t you come with us? We can shop together. We should have been doing that anyway.” For a second, he looked ashamed. “Sorry for leaving, that was really shitty.”

“It’s okay,” Karkat muttered. “Let’s just keep working.”

And with that, all the former tension came flooding back. It made Karkat so frustrated he wanted to
scream. He just couldn’t win.

Why do you care so much, anyway?

Karkat allowed himself to lag behind a bit. Not so far that John or Dave would notice, but far enough
that he could stare at the back of Dave’s head and think. Why did he care so much? It shouldn’t
matter. In the worst case scenario, Dave thought he was an idiot, and in the best, he thought of
Karkat as a friend. Really, neither option was so bad.

But they both made Karkat’s pump biscuit hurt in a way he still didn’t want to acknowledge.

He thought back to the conversation he had had with Kanaya. She had been so convinced that there
was something between Dave and Karkat...

”Are you sure?” she’d asked.

When Karkat had been pitch for Dave, at first, he hadn’t wanted to admit it. He’d lied to himself,
passed it off as regular enmity. But it hadn’t been. Though the feelings had faded, they had been
feelings.

And after that, he had assumed that all romantic feelings for Dave had faded away. But what if he
still wasn’t seeing the truth?

What if Karkat was still hiding from his own emotions?

The more he thought about it, the more confused he became. He knew it wouldn’t do him any good
if he did like Dave, because no matter what Kanaya said, there was no way Dave could ever like him
back. It would be…

It would be too good to be true.

“Fuck,” Karkat thought out loud.

Dave turned around. “Somethin’ wrong?”

What’s wrong is that I somehow still have a fucking crush on you, you goddamn idiot.

“No, nothing,” Karkat mumbled.

***

When they returned, Kanaya gave Karkat a meaningful look. He didn’t even have the energy to
.glare at her, so he just shook his head.

“All right!” Nepeta cheered. “Great job, efurybody.”

“Our missions have been well accomplished,” Rose agreed. “Roxy, would you care to dispense your
goods?” Roxy nodded and began passing out Earth palhushks to each of the trolls (except Sollux,
who was still glued to the one he carried).

“Our next order of business is to acquire a new pod,” Rose said once the trolls had received their
tech. “I have been looking over the security feeds of the city and have found several.” She frowned.
“More than several. I do not pretend to know the workings of your army, but there seems to be an
unusual number of pods about. Frankly, the place is swarming with them. It wasn’t like this a few
“Do you think it’s because of us?” Dirk said sharply.

Rose shook her head helplessly. “I wouldn’t know. But if I had to hazard a guess… I would say that we should be especially careful around these parts.”

“It was probably the ones that kidnapped me,” Karkat spoke up. “Their leader was a real bitch. I wouldn’t put it past her to have sent out the word.”

Rose sighed. “Well, that adds another item to our to-do list: evacuation. If possible, we should leave as soon as we have our new vehicle.”

“And this time, let’s try to get it without half destroying it,” Vriska suggested.

“Yes, that should give it a longer life,” Rose nodded. “The pod I have my eye on is one of the larger models we’ve seen. We could definitely use the extra space, and of course the extra artillery.”

Karkat had already opened up his map. “Where is it?”

“Only a few blocks to the East of us.”

Karkat manipulated the live video feed to show the area Rose indicated. While scanning the nearby streets, he caught sight of a large scarlet pod. “I think I found it. If everyone’s ready, I think we could take it on right now.”

“Give me a few minutes to load up,” said Jade. She stepped briefly into the back of the pod and retrieved a box of fresh ammunition, which she loaded into her rifle. Once it was ready, she gave a thumbs up. “We’re good to go.”

“In that case,” said Karkat. “Helmsman. Take us four blocks East.”

“Affirmative,” the psionic at the helm muttered. The pod swung in the correct direction and began to move. The company traveled in silence. As they grew closer to their destination, Karkat could feel his nerves ramping up. It was just another battle, he reminded himself. He’d survived enough before to know that he would be okay. He was a pretty good fighter, and had friends at his side. They would win.

But even the knowledge of their certain victory didn’t stop his pump biscuit from pounding ever harder as the pod slid to a halt.

“You have arrived at your destination,” said the helmsman.

Through the pod’s windshield Karkat could see their prize, less than a hundred yards away. Now that they were so close, it was even more intimidating. But it would be theirs.

“Jade?” he asked. “How good is your aim?”

She scoffed. “Do you even need to ask? Move over.” He obeyed, and she took his spot by the window to survey her target. “I should be able to hit that with no problem. I can’t see the trolls inside, though, so I can’t take them out. I’ll only be giving away our position if I shoot… We’ll lose the element of surprise.”

“But we’ll get the jump on them,” John pointed out. “I say go for it.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, I agree with little boy blue. We definitely can’t get this one the same
way we did the last one,” Terezi muttered. “It has too much firepower to fight close-range. We need to stay as far as we can.”

“Everyone with guns and good aim to the front, then,” Karkat ordered. Jake, Roxy, and Eridan stepped up to Jade’s side. As an afterthought, Sollux stood behind them.

“My powerth won uth our latht fight,” he said gruffly. “And we juth got lucky that they didn’t have a functioning yellow-blood. I might ath well make mythelf utheful again. If thethe guyth have a capable thionic, I’m our only hope at winning.”

“All right, then.” Rose took a deep breath in and exhaled slowly. “On the count of three, fire in unison.”


For a moment that seemed to last an eternity, they locked eyes. A jolt passed through their gaze and sent a shiver down Karkat’s spine. There was a strange urgency in Dave’s expression, and Karkat suddenly found himself wishing they had gotten to talk more earlier. Was Dave thinking the same thing?

He never got the chance to ask. The moment ended as quickly as it had began, and they were snapped back to reality just in time to hear:

“Three!”

And all hell broke loose.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if this chapter felt clunky, I'm trying to get back in my groove after finally getting my computer back!

So, an update on my situation: Yes, I have my computer back!! But, unfortunately, I probably won't be able to update as quickly as I have in the past. School is hitting me harder this year and a weekly update schedule just isn't realistic. Don't worry though! It won't slip too badly, you can still expect a new chapter every couple weeks. We'll actually be creeping up on the end of this story before too long.

As always, thank you so much for reading! <3
Wrong Place, Wrong Time

Chapter Summary

"The truth is I'm just fucking existing
The truth is I'm just trying to survive
The truth is I've got a problem listening
The truth is that I'm getting by"

-Neverenders, frnkiero andthe cellabration

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jade’s bullet collided with the enemy pod’s window in the very same instant it retaliated. There was no telltale glow of its weapon charging, and no time to prepare: the beam simply exploded from the gun atop the pod’s roof, blowing the pod the Resistance inhabited backwards. It wasn’t strong enough to rip the vehicle apart, but as Dave was knocked down, he felt a quake in the floor that couldn’t be a good sign.

“They saw us coming!” John shouted. “What do we do?”

A second blast rocked the pod in the air, and Dave was thrown across the floor. “I don’t know,” he shouted back. “But we have to fight back somehow!”

“Everyone out!” Karkat was screaming. He rushed past Dave and through the trapdoor. Dave rolled over, snagging a stray helmet on his way, and dropped to the ground. He ducked out from under the pod. It was swaying at a dangerously low altitude, almost too low to stand beneath. One by one, the others came through, until it was empty.

“Run, run, run!” Dave yelled. They made for the opposite end of the street. The second they turned their backs, what had formerly been their pod exploded into a hail of shrapnel and flames. Jake cried out in pain. When Dave glanced over, he almost fell over with shock. A chunk of metal had lodged itself in Jake’s side, piercing straight through his armor, and a patch of red was beginning to seep through. Dirk was at his side in an instant and scooped the smaller boy into his arms.

“Where do we go?” Roxy said, wide-eyed. “We’re too exposed out here!”

For some reason, everyone was looking at Dave and Karkat.

Dave glanced around for any form of shelter. His eyes landed on a storefront not far away. “There!” he pointed.

The motley crew ran as fast as they could, dodging beams of energy and flying scraps of metal. Dave was the first one inside, followed by Karkat. He held the door open until they were all together and he could slam it shut.

Sollux had slipped on a helmet. He fiddled with the controls, his expression bleak. “There are more
Dave shoved the bridge of his glasses further up on his nose. “Okay. Somebody block the door right fucking now! We need to make a battle plan and we need enough time to make it.” He took a closer look at the store they had rushed into. It was some kind of home and garden outlet, full of items large enough to serve as a barricade. Eridan and Terezi rushed to the shelves and began lifting down the heaviest things they could find.

Outside, it had gone quiet. The Alternians had nothing left to shoot at with the Resistance gone, but it wouldn’t be long before they launched a direct attack on the store. The Resistance was left with a minute or so to prepare.

Dave’s heart beat against his ribs like it was trying to escape. He could feel the adrenaline pumping into his veins, making the gears of his mind spin faster and faster to accommodate the dire circumstances. He had to think fast, he had to get them out safe. It was just like any other strife, except this time, it wasn’t only his life that was on the line.

He couldn’t afford to let the panic take over.

“Who’s hurt?” he demanded. Jake raised his hand, the red patch on his armor still growing. “Okay, anyone else?”

“Something happened to my foot,” Roxy winced. “I don’t know how fast I can move.”

“I knocked my head up a little bit,” said Nepeta, tapping her helmet. “But I should be fine.”

“That’s good. Everyone keep your helmets on, we need to be able to understand each other, and to protect our heads,” Dave ordered. He backed up so everyone could see him. “Listen up. We’re going to go upstairs and attack from the second floor for as long as we can. We need to try and leave the pods intact but take out the trolls inside.”

“But we’ll be trapped upstairs,” Rose said, alarmed. “How will we get out?”

“We’ll jump or something, I don’t fucking know,” said Dave. “We don’t have time for anything better. Come on.” He ran for the stairs, ignoring the dread in the back of his mind that said Rose was right. Even in their rushed situation, trapping themselves was a bad idea. But it was all they had.

Dave led his friends upstairs and to the closest window. It was industrial-sized, nearly the length of the wall; it would give them plenty of space to attack from, but not much cover.

“How are we going to open that?” John asked.

Jade looked at it for a moment and scowled. “Watch out.”

She shot straight through it. The glass shattered outwards, and she proceeded directly to business, her rifle making a crack with every shot. Eridan and Roxy joined her, then Vriska, who had grabbed Jake’s pistols. Most of the team was equipped with blasters, so they helped from the sidelines, letting the deadly rain of bullets take center stage.

Dave backed up to survey the group. The trolls seemed fine. Their planet was so warlike, they were probably used to this type of situation. But the humans, even those who had been in battle before, were shell-shocked. Their reflexes were noticeably slower than those of the trolls, and Jane’s hands were shaking with fear as she aimed her blaster. Jake was still leaning on Dirk.

“You okay?” Dave muttered. Jake nodded, but his hand remained pressed to his side.
“Don’t you worry about me,” he said through clenched teeth. “I’m fine. Just peachy, in fact.”

Dave wasn’t convinced. “If you need to sit this one out, you can.”

“No! I’ll do no such thing. This dadblasted injury might be a bother, but it won’t keep me down.” Jake removed his hand, and Dave pretended not to see him cringe.

It didn’t take long for their opponent to realize their strategy. The gun atop the pod swiveled upwards, and Dave barely had time to yell ”duck!” before a jet of light burned through the air above their heads. And to make matters worse, a second pod was cruising down the street towards them.

Luckily, they had skilled marksmen on their side. Dave had focused on Jade’s ability in the past, but Eridan was a damn good shot, and Roxy wasn’t half bad, either. Jake would have been on par with any of them if it weren’t for his injury. They each pummeled a pod with bullets or energy beams. The shots of their companions were more haphazard, but their combined efforts made it so they weren’t immediately overtaken.

“Let us hope that those things cannot fly any higher,” Kanaya muttered.

Fortunately for them, the pods seemed to hover at a fixed height. They could only fire up at the window, and though their weapons were powerful, their aim was impaired by the angle. The Resistance would be relatively safe unless the enemy trolls decided to--

One of the pods stopped firing, and soldiers began to drop from the bottom. Dave swore.

“You keep fighting,” he pointed to Eridan, Jade, and Roxy. “If you get shot, I’ll kill you. Anybody who wants can stay with them, but I need people to help me watch our backs. We’re about to be surrounded in this bad bitch. I’m talking aliens after us like Leo after the Oscar, they’ll be lifting us up on the bow of the Titanic before we know it, warbling out some Celine Dion, not a single dry eye in the goddamn house, holy shit that was irrelevant, sorry. Anyway, who’s with me?”

As he gave out orders, he thought he felt something in him solidify. It was a feeling he had rarely experienced as of late, but it wasn’t unfamiliar. It was that same calm that fell over him like a blanket when Bro had gone too far. All he had to do was look at things objectively, and damn it, he would survive.

Vriska, Karkat, and Terezi were the first to volunteer to fight with him. They were followed by Jane and Nepeta. The rest stayed at the window, clinging to their weak advantage.

Dave took a deep breath in through his nose, then exhaled through his mouth. “Nepeta, Terezi. You two are on the front lines.” He pointed to the mouth of the stairs. “Go halfway down and try and hold off as many as you can. If there are too many, retreat to the top. Vriska and Jane, you’ll be stationed there, so you can help them if they need it. Me and Karkat will wait up here as the final defense.”

He tried to split them up by ability as much as he could. Vriska and Terezi were both good fighters, from what he had seen, with Nepeta nearly matching their skill level. Jane was… a little shaky. Dave tried to convince himself that he was putting her in a position where she’d have the ability to retreat if she needed, but really, he just didn’t want to separate himself from Karkat. If one of them died before they resolved the weird tension between them, it would be unbearable.

If one of them died, it would be unbearable.

Dave was used to situations in which his life was on the line, but having the responsibility to take care of others was new for him. He could only try his best and pray that it was enough. It was
definitely stressful, but also kind of… motivating. He knew that he didn’t have time to panic over the weight of the task before him. He just couldn’t.

His troops took their respective positions by the staircase and waited, blasters at the ready.

The barricade they had left at the main entrance bought them enough time to prepare, but it didn’t take long for the trolls to break through with a vicious battle cry. Nepeta and Terezi were on them in an instant. They carved a streak of destruction through their foes, and though they were valiantly opposed, they managed to take out the first wave with no more injury than a singed arm on Nepeta’s part.

“Bad news!” Rose shouted from the window. “There are more pods coming. Many more.”

Nepeta blew a puff of smoke from the end of her blaster. “Bring it on.”

The first wave of trolls had been a single squadron. It had been six against two, and though Terezi and Nepeta had been outnumbered, the squadron had been hopelessly outskilled. This time, at least three squadrons rushed in at once, and numbers started to matter a little more. Terezi shot down at a few, successfully taking them down before swearing loudly. “Get back!”

She and Nepeta withdrew to the top of the stairs, where they were joined by Jane and Vriska. The ratio was balanced out once more. Jane caught a blast to the stomach, and she was knocked down, but her armor served her well. She stood back up, dazed but not incapacitated. It only took a moment for her to rejoin the fight.

Dave risked a glance back upstairs. Jade had paused to reload her gun, fumbling over the ammo for a moment before resuming fire. Jake was still standing. Everyone seemed to be still going strong, to his relief. Sollux’s weird psychic powers were back in action, stopping jets of enemy fire in midair and redirecting them towards the pods below. Dave’s eyes narrowed. An idea was slowly coming together in his head…

“Retreat!” Nepeta screeched. “Karkat!”

Dave whipped back around, firing his blaster before he could even take aim. The resulting beam soared over the head of an advancing troll. Downstairs, fallen bodies now littered the ground, but more soldiers continued to bust in through the door.

“Rose!” he yelled. “Are any of them staying in the pods, or are they all coming in here?”

“I think they’re all coming in,” she shouted back. “Why?”

“Because I have a plan. It’s really fucking stupid and I’ll probably die, but whatever, it’s a plan, right? Get away from the window. Most of the pods out there are empty, it’s no use attacking them. Help us fend off the foot soldiers!”

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Karkat snapped. Most of his attention was still on the fight, but Dave’s announcement hadn’t gone unnoticed.

Dave’s resolve faltered. “Karkat…”

He needs you.

He drew Karkat into a tight one-armed embrace. “Stay alive,” he said gruffly. “And if I die, tell everybody I looked fucking badass doing it.”
He pulled away before Karkat could say anything, and then he was running towards the window and grabbing a startled Sollux by the shoulders.

“Your blood is yellow, right? The yellow ones fly the ships?” he said urgently.

“Yeth,” Sollux said, apprehensive. “What are you-- oh.” His eyes widened behind his visor. ”Oh.”

“Glad we’re on the same page.” Dave turned to face the window. “Now let’s try to stay alive.”

He grabbed onto Sollux’s arm and pulled him forward, and then they were through the shattered window and free-falling down. Sollux was screaming at the top of his lungs. Dave felt like doing the same. They were in the air for a split second, then: *smack.* They collided with the roof of a pod. Dave’s skin flickered with a blue and red light. Sollux had used his powers to slow their descent at the last moment, but the impact still hurt like a bitch.

“You thon of a *fuck!*” Sollux raged. “If Karkat wathn’t fluthed for you, I would rip out your thpine and thove it up your ath! You couldn’t have fucking warned me before you jumped?”

Dave shrugged. “Dunno. We needed the speed. Come on, we don’t have time to argue.” The pod they were standing on was empty, but there were still more coming from down the street. Those were the ones they would target.

“I athume we’re taking over thith thing?” Sollux asked, indicating the pod below them. Dave nodded.

“Then we use it to fight the ones that are still coming in. If our friends kill the trolls inside, and we kill the backup, then we could all make it out of this alive.”

“Dave, what are you doing?” Rose yelled from the window.

“Being an idiot!” Sollux shouted back. He shot a glare at Dave. “Thith plan ith thtupid. I’ve *never* wanted to be a helmthman. You don’t theeom to fucking underthtand that the thionicth who pilot thethe thipth end up with their panth rotting out of their goddamn thkullth. But… It jutht might work, ath long ath I’m not piloting for too long.” He turned back up to Rose. “Finith off the oneth inthide, then help uth. Tell Vrithka to uthe her mind powerth when I give the thignal!”

“What’s the signal?”

“The’ll know it when the theeom it!” Sollux aimed his blaster at the roof of the pod and fired, Dave joining in until the metal began to weaken. They were going for one small opening, in contrast to the gaping holes that had peppered the walls of their previous pod. After a few minutes of firing, the roof caved in to form a small, misshapen hole, just large enough for a human or troll to fit through. The edges smoked with heat, but Sollux didn’t hesitate before jumping down. Dave gritted his teeth before following.

*Please don’t touch the--*

“*Fuck!*” His right arm scraped all the way down against the superheated metal, searing a scarlet mark into the flesh. He fell to the ground, clutching his wounded arm to his chest. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Okay.” He took a labored breath in. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“You’re fucking thtupid ith what you are,” said Sollux, but his scorn masked a hint of worry. “Get up. I’ll do the flying, you watch my back.”

Dave shoved away the burning pain in his arm, forcing himself to stand. Luckily, he was left-
handed. He could still shoot, even with his other arm incapacitated. As he looked up, his eyes fell upon the pilot’s seat— it was occupied.

“Shit,” he started, raising his blaster, but Sollux held up a hand.

“It’th okay.”

Sollux approached the helmsman with what Dave could only call tenderness. He gently lifted the helmet from the pilot’s head, producing a horrifying sound like a suction cup that had Dave covering his mouth with one hand.

“You don’t have to do thith anymore,” Sollux whispered. “You’re free.”

His fingers worked through the knot of cables and wires at the helmsman’s back, finally ripping them apart when they refused to cooperate. The helmsman fell forward, but Sollux threw his arm out, catching him and laying him to the ground.

“Now,” he said, his face hardening. “Dave. Watch my back.”

He slipped the gloves from the helmsman’s hands and slipped them on, then put on the helmet, the pod shifting beneath their feet as he did so. Sollux was in control now. He raised a hand, and Dave heard something mechanical whir behind the pod’s walls.


“Quit fucking around,” Dave muttered. The pain in his arm was getting harder to ignore. “In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re still under attack.”

“Dave, I have a large and deadly weapon under the control of my very thoughtth. Bothing me around ithn’t the thmarteth move.” Sollux brought his hands together, and the pod rose a few feet. “Let’th kick thome ath.”

The pod surged forward, and Dave heard every weapon it had go off at once. It was an intensely satisfying noise, like a spaceship in an action movie. He watched through the windshield as the approaching pods halted, and had to laugh— he could practically see the shocked expressions of the trolls inside.

But that shock quickly turned to fury, and they lashed out with all their might. The battle was a symphony, and Sollux was the conductor, his hands waving in frenzied movements as the pod dodged heavy lasers and answered with its own. Dave burned a hole through the window just large enough to aim his blaster through, and contributed with weaker shots of his own.

Inside, the Resistance must have recognized Sollux’s signal. Dave saw a hail of bullets and beams join them from above, slamming down on all the enemies that threatened to overwhelm.

After a moment, Sollux shouted with laughter. “It payth to have a blue-blood on your thide, thuckath!”

“What do you mean?” Dave asked.

“Vrithka. The hath thith mind control thing, look.” Sollux pointed to an enemy pod which seemed to have switched sides. It was firing with them, taking aim at any that dared to approach Sollux and Dave.

With one pod against tens, Dave had known it was only a matter of time until they lost.
With two… Well, that was a different story.

And the number only kept growing. Vriska’s powers must have had some kind of gravitational pull—if any other pod got too close, it would be snatched into her control. Before long, the Resistance had an almost even number of forces as their enemy.

Dave watched with disbelief and more than a little awe as slowly, their enemy turned and fled.

“Did we just win?” he said, numb to the reality around him. “Did we just… seriously win?”

Sollux ripped his helmet off. His eyes were crusted with an alarming tint of yellow, but he looked anything but hurt. He was jubilant. “Yeth, you dumbath! We won!”

The feeling slowly flooded back into Dave’s head, and a smile appeared with it, growing wider and wider until he was laughing. It was the giddy sound of adrenaline being released, it was relief made audible, and it was fucking amazing. He was okay. They were all okay!

Inside his helmet, something crackled to life beside his ear. A speaker. Rose’s voice sounded exhausted: “Get back inside, Dave.”

Dave didn’t have to be told twice. Sollux snapped his fingers, and the trapdoor popped open. Dave helped him rip off the piloting gear, and the two tumbled out of the pod, racing back toward the building where their friends waited. Inside, the floor was piled with fallen trolls, dead or injured, Dave couldn’t bring himself to care. He could deal with guilt later. Now, he was just glad that everyone had made it. He tripped up the stairs and burst onto the second floor.

Dave wasn’t aware that he was searching for Karkat until he found him, and nearly tackled him with relief.

“You’re alive! Holy shit, we did it, you’re alive!” Dave wrapped his arms around Karkat and squeezed as tightly as he could.

“Get off me,” Karkat mumbled, but he held Dave even more tightly. “You’re a fucking lunatic. Did you really think jumping out a goddamn window was going to save us?”

“Uh, yeah,” Dave laughed. “And I wasn’t wrong, was I?”

Karkat pulled away, trying and failing to look angry. He could only manage a sort of half-glare before rolling his eyes and letting a grin creep its way onto his face. “Okay, hero. Don’t be too modest.”

Dave had to pause before making a witty comeback. Maybe it was the relief of survival, but the tension between him and Karkat seemed to have vanished. They were back to their old rapport, it seemed, but something felt… different. He hadn’t appreciated Karkat properly until now. Dave couldn’t even begin to describe how glad he was that the troll had made it. Just looking at Karkat, smiling in all his beat-up glory, made his heart swell.

“What’re you looking at?” Karkat said, flustered. “Are you just fulfilling your daily obligation to zone out like an idiot?”

Dave silently pulled Karkat back into his arms. The troll rested his chin on Dave’s shoulder, and they shared a moment in which, for once, neither of them had to say anything.

“I hate to interrupt, but we have a situation on our hands,” Rose broke in. Dave quickly stepped away from Karkat.
He looked to Rose. “What’s the situ-- oh, shit.”

Jake was on the floor, his armor tossed aside, shirt soaked with much more blood than Dave remembered. Dave raced over, his hands fluttering helplessly around the wound. “Oh shit, what happened? Shit, shit--”

“He let his hero complex get the best of him,” Dirk muttered. He was pressing a towel to Jake’s stomach; it was already covered with red.

“You would’ve been shot!” Jake protested weakly.

“I would’ve dodged it.”

“No, you wouldn’t have.”

“So what?” Dirk snapped. “Jake, you absolute prick, you can’t just sacrifice yourself for me!”

“I couldn’t just let you--”

“Stop it,” said Rose. “We can argue over who acted more foolishly once Jake is stable.” Jade hurried over with another towel. Dirk snatched it and traded it for the one he had been using.

“I don’t regret it,” Jake said.

Dirk sighed. “I know you don’t. I know you don’t fucking regret it, okay? That’s why you’re an idiot.” The venom had dissipated from his words, leaving them tired and defeated. He set his sunglasses aside, then leaned over and pressed a kiss to Jake’s cheek.

Dave slowly backed away. He felt like he was intruding on something private, something no one was meant to see but Dirk and Jake. Karkat was at his side in an instant, and the they watched as the color continued to fade from Jake’s face.

Jake smiled feebly. “I wouldn’t go about insulting a man on his deathbed.”

“You’re not going to die,” Dirk said roughly. “You’re going to be fine. Just hold on, okay?”

Karkat grasped Dave’s hand, and their fingers laced together instinctively.

“Don’t let them get you,” Jake whispered.

“Jake, don’t.”

“Please don’t let them win.”

“You’re going to help us fight them,” Dirk said, grabbing Jake’s hand like a lifeline. “We’ll stop this bullshit invasion together. We’re going to do this together, all right? All right, Jake?”

Jake just smiled sadly, blood visible at the edges of his lips.

“No. Don’t fucking do this, Jake, come on.” The desperation in Dirk’s voice was palatable. “Stay with me. I love you, god damnit, you can’t just give up. We’ve made it this far, haven’t we? We’re doing this together.”

Jake breathed out a quiet sigh. Dave saw his grip on Dirk’s hand slacken. His green eyes dimmed, and his head dropped down. He was… he was...
Dave closed his eyes, heart plunging into his stomach.

Did you seriously think you could save them all?

Karkat buried his face in Dave’s shoulder, and they both pretended not to hear how Dirk’s breath shook, how he repeated Jake’s name over and over, his voice finally breaking into a sob.

You’re no hero, Dave.

Jake was. Karkat is. Sollux and Vriska are, hell, they all are.

You’re not.

Chapter End Notes

oopsies
Chapter Summary

"Were we born to abuse, shoot a gun and run
Or has something deep inside of us come undone?
Is it a human trait, or is it learned behavior?
Are you killing for yourself, or killing for your savior?"

-Savages, Marina and the Diamonds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the battle, Karkat felt a little out of touch with reality. Everything he saw felt like a movie playing out before him, distant and surreal. He wasn’t the only one. Dave was still walking around like the living dead. The only person who seemed to have taken it harder was Dirk; he was wrecked beyond description. If Dave was a zombie, Dirk was a corpse.

Karkat wasn’t on quite their level of grief, given he hadn’t known Jake very well, but that didn’t make his death any less devastating.

The pure shock of it was enough to strike them all dumb. The Resistance had lost a teammate, and for the rest of the night, the mood was somber. Jake’s absence was glaringly obvious. Karkat kept expecting to hear some kind of weird, accented vernacular among the humans’ voices, but it never came. It would never come again. The situation would have been depressing enough if they had known it would happen, but there had been no warning, or at least none that they took too seriously.

Someone had actually died.

Karkat didn’t know how they hadn’t seen it coming-- they were fifteen kids against an army of thousands. Of course there would be casualties. If they looked at it realistically, there was a good chance none of them would survive. They had all embraced their cause, knowing they might have to die for it, but had they really known? Had they understood?

They had been fools to think themselves invincible.

Karkat couldn’t blame them, of course. He couldn’t even blame himself. They had all wanted to believe everyone would survive. How could they have gone on if they didn’t? If he had known just how risky it was to let Dave run off on his own, would he have let him? Fuck no. Just the thought of it sent shivers down his posture pole. Dave and Sollux had gotten lucky. If the fates hadn’t been on their side, they would’ve been just another number added to the body count.

There’s a body count now.

Dave felt guilty, Karkat could tell, probably more than anyone could understand. Karkat didn’t know when, but somewhere along their journey, the Resistance had started looking to Dave as a leader, and even if it wasn’t official, there was far too much pressure on his shoulders. Just like everyone else, he had thought they would all survive, but his torment was unique. He thought it was his fault.
Karkat knew exactly how it felt to blame yourself for something out of your control. If he hadn’t learned to accept his blood color, he’d be a fucking mess of self-loathing. Dave had helped him through it, mostly without even realizing.

Karkat was determined to do the same for him.

He hadn’t spoken a word since the Resistance abandoned the scene, leaving Jake in the store. Jade and Jane had protested, but in the end, Dirk shut them down. There was no way to give him a proper burial, no way to take him with them. He would have to stay. The battlefield would be his grave.

Dave had walked out as if every movement cost him a terrible price.

Now, he sat in the corner of their freshly-obtained pod, scrolling through something on his palmhusk. Karkat glanced over at him every few seconds. He had opted to give Dave some space, but maybe it would be better to offer comfort. He looked haunted even with the sunglasses covering his glance nuggets-- Karkat wouldn’t want to see his face if he took them off.

He walked carefully over to Dave, then sat down beside him.

“Hi.”

It took a moment for Karkat’s words to register. When they did, Dave’s nugbone lifted the slightest bit.

“‘Sup.”

Karkat took a quick breath. There was no way to make this easier, or any less awkward. “I’m not going to ask if you’re okay, because the obvious answer is hell fucking no, and I’m not going to pretend everything is normal. Everything is sucked. But I’m not about to let you beat yourself up, either.” A sudden urge to grab Dave’s hand overtook him, and he didn’t bother fighting it. He grasped Dave’s fingers tightly and gave them a tiny shake to emphasize his point. “This isn’t your fault. It’s not.”

“Ohay,” Dave said.

Karkat blinked. “What?”

“I said okay,” Dave repeated, his voice completely monotone.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I dunno,” Dave said with a shrug. “It means ‘okay.’ You can say whatever you want, I’m not going to argue with you.”

Karkat’s glance nuggets narrowed. “So, you don’t believe me.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Karkat couldn’t remember Dave ever acting like this. He didn’t know how to respond. Was this passive aggression, or something else? Was Dave trying to push him away? Whatever Dave needed to do to cope was fine, but it needed to be healthy, and Karkat needed to understand.

“You implied it,” he said quietly. “So I’ll repeat myself. This is not your fault. This is what we all signed up for. We knew it was risky, and we fought anyway. All of us. This isn’t anyone’s fault, and it sure as hell isn’t yours-- nobody made you leader. Nobody blames you. You don’t have to beat...
“Okay,” said Dave.

Karkat paused. He hadn’t known what to say before, but now he was completely lost. He had been expecting an argument, for Dave to blame himself, for him to at least show some type of feeling.

Somehow, this was worse.

“I don’t know what to do to make you feel better,” Karkat mumbled. “So, uh… I guess I’ll just stay here. We don’t have to talk about it.” Moving only an inch at a time, he scooched closer to where Dave sat, until their sides were touching. Dave didn’t move away, so he figured he wasn’t overstepping any boundaries.

Dave had been so happy before he realized what had happened. The way he’d rushed straight to Karkat…

“You’re alive!”

It had been as if nothing else mattered. Dave’s smile was the brightest thing Karkat had seen in weeks, and he had smiled back, probably looking like a lovesick idiot. They were both alive, and that was all that mattered. Dave had hugged him so tightly.

But then his glance nuggets had fixed on Jake, and it had all come apart. As Karkat watched Dave’s smile fracture and break, something inside him did the same.

He laid his nugbone on Dave’s shoulder, wishing he knew how to fix things.

***

Sollux had ardently refused to pilot, so the new vehicle they had chosen was equipped with a functional helmsman. After Sollux gave him the command to fly them away, no one spoke for several hours. Karkat remained by Dave’s side. Across the room, Rose was nestled in Kanaya’s arms, and Terezi lay with her nugbone in Vriska’s lap. They all needed someone to bear the silence with.

When it was broken, it was once again by Sollux, but with a vastly altered tone of voice.

“Guyth!” he said, sitting bolt upright. “Guyth, guyth, I did it!”

“Did what?” Vriska said crossly. “Calm down.”

“No!” He was grinning, suddenly looking happier than he had in weeks. He waved his palmhusk in the air. “I did it, I did it! I broke the fucking wall!”

Eridan jumped up. “Do you mean--”

“I got through to her!” Sollux said joyfully. “I juth that a methage and it went through!”

Nepeta gasped. “You mean, you talked to Feferi? Sollux, that’s great mews!”

“Well, I haven’t talked to her yet,” Sollux admitted, but it did nothing to quell his excitement. “The hathn’t rethponded. But the will, I know the will. We’re going to get her back.”

“That reminds me, have we heard from Equius and Aradia?” Kanaya asked.
“Yes. They’re on their way to us,” said Nepeta, Sollux’s happiness beginning to rub off on her. A small smile broke out across her face. “They should reach us in a couple of hours.”

“We’re getting the gang back together,” Terezi grinned, sitting up. “I never thought I’d be glad to see Sweaty McHoofbeast again, but what do you know?”

“I still won’t be glad to see him,” Karkat muttered. His nugbone still sat on Dave’s shoulder. Most of the humans looked confused, but Dave had yet to show any sort of reaction. It was really fucking worrisome, and Karkat wasn’t going to move until he had figured out how to bring him back to normal.

“Who exactly are Equius and Aradia?” Jade asked. “I know they’re your friends, but…” She giggled. “What are they like? I need to know what to expect if we’re going to meet them!”

Sollux threw a hand into the air. “Thut up, thut up! The rethponded!”

For a few minutes, he was silent, his cheeks flushing yellow with happiness. Through his visor, Karkat could see his glance nuggets flicking back and forth, reading through messages and composing replies.

“Is she okay?” Nepeta said eagerly.

“Oh, yeah! The’th fine. The’th been watching over the battle…” Sollux’s voice trailed off. There was a pause as he read through a new message. When he spoke again, his delight had vanished. “Oh. We’ve been noticed.”

Karkat sat up for the first time. “What do you mean, we’ve been noticed?”

“Thut up,” Sollux said, his glance nuggets moving rapidly back and forth. “Juth… Fuck. Fuck. That battle we juth had? It ithn’t going to be our latht. They’ve gotten wind of our little rebellion up there…” He pointed to the roof of the pod. “And they’re not going to let it continue.”

“What does that mean?” Vriska demanded. “I mean, it’s just more fighting, right? Nothing we can’t handle.”

“There you go again, displaying your blatant idiocy,” Karkat snapped. “Honestly, if your oversized nugbone exploded and caused your early death, it would raise the IQ of this team by five hundred points. We’re up against an entire goddamn planet, genius. You want to see what we can handle?”

“We could take a planet,” Sollux mumbled. He slid his helmet off and let it clatter to the floor. His 3-D glasses fell off with it. It was always a bit of a challenge to gauge his emotion, with the solid hues of his glance nuggets, but for once, the horror they contained was clear to see. “That’th nothing compared to what’th coming.”

“What’s coming?” Roxy whispered.

Sollux was silent for a long moment.

“The Condethe. The Condethe ith coming after uth.”

In the moment before the words truly sunk in, all Karkat could think was, ”Fuck.”

The pod exploded into uproar. Eridan was demanding they move faster, that escape was imperative; Terezi suggested they find better artillery; Karkat thought he heard someone shout “Surrender!” before he was on his feet, screaming over the din.
“Shut the fuck up, all of you! Sollux, make the helmsman go faster, and if this thing has any defenses, get them online. Do we have a destination?”

“No,” Sollux said quickly. “I’ll have him head for the nearest shelter.”

“Good. Nepeta, update Aradia and Equius on our location and status. We’ll need their help now more than ever.” He could tell that his cheeks were bright red with fury, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. There was no time for petty embarrassment. And why should he be embarrassed, anyway? This was a fight for his freedom. Yeah, his face got flushed when he was pissed off. So what? Yeah, he flushed red. So what? He was a mutant, and god fucking dammit it, he was not going to die before he could spit in the Condesce’s face and watch her fuschia blood spill.

“Isn’t the Condesce your leader?” Rose said. She remained remarkably composed, and though it was undoubtedly forced, Karkat had to admire her control. “Shouldn’t we be very, very afraid?”

“Yes,” he answered. “And if we don’t act quickly, we’re going to be very, very dead.”

“Then we need a way to fight back!” John jumped in. “We can’t defend ourselves with just one pod. We need more people and more guns!”

“And where do you suggest we find those?” asked Karkat.

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Then for now, we focus on getting somewhere remotely sheltered,” said Karkat. “Our main objective is--”

“Um,” Jane said timidly. “I think I might know where we could get better guns.”

Karkat stopped short. Jane adjusted her glasses, looking only at the floor. “There are only two groups who have been successfully fighting the Alternians. Us, and the military. Why don’t we team up? There are a few bases in Kansas.”

“They’d kill us on sight,” Dirk said bluntly. “An alien pod rolls on in, with a conveniently docile group of invaders? No way. They’d never believe it.”

“But they aren’t just invaders. They’re our friends,” Jane argued. “The military would understand, we’d make them!”

“They would just think we had alien eggs living in our brains or something.”

“Then that’s a chance we’ll have to take!” she said fiercely. “Do you know any other place where we can get weapons strong enough to take on this Condesce?”

Dirk sighed. “No. I just don’t want us to get killed before we explore all our options.”

“This may be our only option,” Rose murmured. “You both have valid points, but the situation is dire. We need every ounce of firepower we can get our hands on.”

Karkat felt Dave shift, and then he was sitting up, his palmhusk out once more. “We need numbers, too. I’ve been checking my Twitter feed, it’s actually kind of blown up since the last time I looked. We’ve missed a lot.”

The others looked at him expectantly.

There had been a knot in Karkat’s digestion sack ever since Dave had gone silent hours earlier, but
he appeared to have recovered now. He was sitting up straighter, his motions somehow crisper, less listless. Karkat breathed a quiet sigh of relief before Dave continued.

“The mothership we saw in Texas-- the Condesce isn’t on that, is she? She’s on a separate one?” Karkat nodded. “Good. That one’s moving away from us now, and the major battle’s moved with it, thank God. Since the entire planet hasn’t been invaded yet, a lot of other countries are pouring in to try and help fight. Except Russia. Russia thinks it’s all a hoax.” He snorted. “Anyway, the fight’s picking up. It looks like those who aren’t involved with the army are all tweeting me. Like, everyone. Jesus Christ. I thought I was an internet celebrity before…” He paused. “’Y’know, we actually have a decent following going. Maybe even the size of Alternia’s army. Damn. Never underestimate the power of the internet, I guess.”

He was quiet for a moment, scrolling rapidly through his feed. Then he opened a different app, typing something in and scanning the results. “Jane’s right, there are a few military bases in this state… One of them actually isn’t too far away. What do you think?”

“Where has the mothership moved to?” asked John.

“Not anywhere in the southwest. There weren’t a lot of people out here to begin with, and they’ve all evacuated, so there was nobody to defend the cities. It breezed right through… I think it’s in California now.”

Roxy winced. “Aww, no! I live in Cali… Or, I did. I bet my house has gotten blown up by now. Rip in fuckin’ pieces.” She clenched a fist over her heart. “Let’s hope they left the In-N-Out joints intact.”

Rose moved over to Dave and looked over his shoulder at the palmhusk. “You say most of the world’s military has followed the mothership. Would that include forces from all over the U.S.?”

“Dunno. What are you suggesting?” he asked.

“Well… I suppose I’m suggesting we hijack an abandoned base, if that’s at all possible.”

He grimaced. “I don’t know if we could manage that, even with our mighty teenage army. There’s bound to be a shit ton of defenses.”

“What kind of defentheth?” said Sollux, sounding intrigued. “I bet I could take ‘em down. Your Earth tech’th no match for me.”

Dave looked around in disbelief. “Wait, are we seriously doing this?” No one offered any objection, and a grin slowly formed on his face. “Well, that’s something to check off my bucket list. I guess I’ll send out an invitation to, hmm… the entire human race.” He began to thumb out a message on his palmhusk, then stopped. “Wait, Karkat. Get in for a selfie. The fans love the ones we posted before.”

Karkat rolled his glance nuggets, but allowed Dave to pull his nugbone close for a picture. Dave stuck out his arm, palmhusk aimed at their faces, and pressed his lips to Karkat’s cheek as he pressed the button. Click.

Wait, what?

Dave was pulling away before Karkat could react. His attention returned to his palmhusk, and Karkat could only gape for a moment before shaking himself. This was no time to be worrying about Dave’s romantic intentions, or lack thereof. Unless, of course, he really had intended for it to be a romantic gesture--
No. Fuck. Focus, stupid.

Sollux cleared his throat loudly. “Ath thoonth thothe two dethide to get a block already, I found a plathe for uth to hide out until we can move to the bathe. Aradia and Equiuth are almotht there, too.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Dirk said suddenly. His palmhusk appeared in his hand. “Karkat, uh… I’m going to update Delilah on our location. Okay?”

Oh.

Her.

Karkat had almost forgotten.

“Yeah, that’s okay,” he said, even though it was completely out of the blue and far from ‘okay’. “How far away is she?”

“She should get here tomorrow,” said Dirk, not looking up from his screen. “It’ll be good to see her again. For both of us. I’ve missed her.”

“Oh… Yeah.” Karkat wished Dirk hadn’t reminded him. Reuniting with a mother he couldn’t remember… It didn’t feel as awful as it had before. Weird as it was, he had kind of gotten used to the concept of being half-alien. But it would still be awkward as fuck to see her. He wasn’t looking forward to it.

Something brushed against his side, jolting him from his thoughts, and he jumped.

“Sorry, sorry,” said Dave. He pulled his hand back, looking apologetic. “Should’ve asked.”

“No, it’s fine. You just startled me,” Karkat mumbled. Cautiously, he leaned back against Dave, and he felt his hand return. Dave’s touch was light, tentative; he was pushing their unspoken boundaries of physical contact. And he was nervous about it. From where Karkat’s nugbone was positioned, he could feel Dave’s pump biscuit beating at an elevated pace. The space between them seemed electric. Was it Karkat’s imagination, or did Dave’s breathing suddenly seem overly controlled? He was nervous…

Was he nervous for the same reason Karkat was?

“To quote a human phrathe,” Sollux muttered. “Jethuth fucking Chriiht. Did you not hear me when I told you to get a block?”

“Shut up,” Karkat said, his face burning. But he didn’t move, and neither did Dave.

Karkat would have been content if neither of them moved for hours.

***

The “shelter” Sollux had chosen for them turned out to be some kind of department store. It wasn’t perfect, but it had a few floors, most of which were underground, and multiple exits. It was the best they could’ve gotten. Karkat pushed through a rack of clothing, idly wondering how humans found a need for so many clothing stores.

The Resistance occupied themselves setting up temporary defenses as they waited. The threat of the Condesce hung heavy in the air, but it could be diminished, if only a little, by the promise of the arrival of old friends. Nepeta kept her glance nuggets glued to the store’s security cameras.
Even before the knock on the door, her squeal was the first sign of Equius and Aradia.

“They’re here, they’re here!” Karkat heard her trip as she scrambled for the door. “Everybody, come quick!”

He emerged from the comfortable pile of fabric he had built just in time to see Nepeta throw the doors open and leap into Equius’s arms without so much as a hello.

“So those are the extras,” Dave said appreciatively. “Good to know that trolls don’t get any more normal.”

Karkat rolled his glance nuggets, but couldn’t keep the affection from his smile as he looked at Dave. The two of them had gravitated together ever since that morning. Karkat didn’t want to get his hopes up, but he was starting to think that maybe, just maybe--

His thoughts were interrupted by another loud shriek from Nepeta. She was uncharacteristically excited, bordering on Feferi’s level, but he could understand. She hadn’t seen her beloved moirail in weeks, and they were in the middle of a war zone. Her relief was palpable.

“Hello!” Aradia called from the doorway. At the sound of her voice, Sollux came bounding up the stairs from the floor below. One by one, more trolls began to appear, until their entire social circle was crowded at the entrance.

“I did not expect such a welcome,” Equius muttered. “Tell me, does this place have towels on hand?”

“Don’t worry,” said Vriska. “None of us are excited to see you.” Indeed, she didn’t look pleased to see Aradia, either, but she contained herself to merely glare at the new arrivals.

Karkat was content to look on from a distance. Reuniting Equius and Aradia with their troll friends was the first step. Dave, who was hovering behind Karkat, and the rest of the humans, would be the next stage. It would take some explaining and a few get-to-know-you exercises before their newly-expanded group was fully comfortable.

“We should get going,” he heard Terezi say. “We haven’t got a moment to lose now that we’re together.”

Kanaya nodded. “We will pack our things and depart at once. All further introductions can be made as we travel.”

And with that, the group split apart. Sollux gathered up the various bits of tech that had already been scattered across the floor, and Eridan led the rest of the trolls outside. He paused at the doorway. “Are you guys comin’?”

Karkat stepped forward, motioning for the humans to follow him. Until that moment, they had just been standing around awkwardly. Dave stuck close behind him. Karkat wasn’t sure if it was to minimize his social isolation or for some other reason. He hoped it was for some other reason.

Fuck, he really hoped it was for some other reason. He wanted that reason to be that Dave wanted to be close to him. He wanted Dave to want him, damn it, the same way Karkat wanted him. It was beginning to weigh on his pan more heavily, and no matter how he cautioned himself not to get his hopes up, he was failing miserably. It took great effort not to look over his shoulder at Dave as he walked outside.

The pod’s trapdoor had been left open for them. Karkat climbed inside, giving a nod to Equius and
Aradia. They weren’t very close, so a hug and tearful greeting wasn’t necessary, but he wasn’t just going to ignore them. He had some manners. And due to those manners, he wasn’t going to allow any divisions in the team. When the humans and trolls had first met, Karkat had facilitated the introductions; he felt no reason not to repeat this role.

“Right,” he announced. “Aradia. Equius. You’ve probably noticed by now that our team isn’t composed singularly of Alternians, and if you haven’t, well, I can’t cure idiocy. It’s time for you to get to know each other. Get comfortable, get cozy, cuddle the fuck up.” An unexpecting Jade’s head popped up through the trapdoor, and he shoved her forward. “This is Jade. Say hi. Jade, this is Equius, and that’s Aradia.”

“Hi,” said Jade, looking a little embarrassed. What was she embarrassed for? Karkat was being perfectly normal, thanks. Nothing about this felt forced at all.

“Don’t mind Karkat, he’s just trying to get it all over with,” Aradia said breezily. “He might not be the most successful, but his pump biscuit’s in the right place.” Jade laughed. Aradia shook her hand, and the mood seemed to lighten.

Karkat had done that, right? Yes. That was definitely all his doing.

After that, the humans took charge of their own introductions. Karkat backed up to the wall and stared out the window, tapping his fingers against his side. As he was the master of social interaction, he knew when people needed some space.

“Dude,” said Dave, leaning against the wall next to him. “Do you think you’re slick? Because you are super definitely not slick.” Karkat looked at him, and he tried to hold a straight face, but snorted out a laugh. “What’s up with you? You’re acting super high-strung all of a sudden.”

“I’m not,” said Karkat.

Dave raised an eyebrow. “Uh, yes, you are.” He looked at Karkat for a moment more before sighing and lowering his voice. “Look, if this is about earlier… Shit, I’m sorry, man. That just kind of happens sometimes, I can’t control it, and I definitely didn’t mean to hurt you.” He slipped his shades off, blinking anxiously. “Did I? Hurt you, I mean?”

Karkat studied his face for a moment. He wasn’t going to lie. Seeing Dave so stony had been unsettling and yeah, it had been a little bit hurtful, but it wasn’t something that Karkat would hold against him. He just needed to know that Dave was okay. Couldn’t he see that was the only thing that mattered?

Dave just stood there, his glance nuggets shining scarlet.

Karkat didn’t think he’d ever thought of the color as being so beautiful before.

“I just want you to be okay,” he said finally. “Are you okay?”

“Uh…” Dave grimaced. “Well, not really. But that can’t be helped, can it?”

“I guess not. Will you be, though? Eventually? Or, no. The question I should be asking is, can I help?”

“Yes. Just…” Dave hesitated, then shook himself. “I’ll be okay. Just don’t suddenly decide you hate me or anything.” He laughed, but it felt wrong.

Karkat’s glance nuggets narrowed. Dave had been about to say something different. What would he
have said?

He seemed to notice Karkat’s suspicion, abruptly changing the subject. “So. If it isn’t because of me, how come you’re acting all weird?”

Karkat looked away, hoping the heat in his cheeks wasn’t visible. “Fuck off, I’m acting totally normal.” In truth, he hadn’t been aware that he was acting any different. He just couldn’t take his thoughts off Dave.

Fuck, that was embarrassing to think about. He was such a fucking gooner.

“Whatever you say,” Dave said skeptically. “But if you want to talk about anything, I’m here.”

“Will you two quit it?” Vriska complained. “I think I’m going to be sick. Anyway, we’re here, dumbfucks. If you could tear your glance nuggets away from each other for half a second you’d have noticed.”

“Already?” Karkat said, pressing his hand to the window and looking out. Across a stretch of road was a wide field, and behind it, a foreboding complex. There was an official-looking sign written in English. “What’s that say?” he asked, pointing to it.

“It’s an air force base,” Dave said, squinting out. “We’re here.”

“Time to get this party started,” said Terezi, cracking her knuckles. “Let’s get out the big guns.”

***

The entire journey of the Resistance had been marked by strokes of luck. When they approached the base and found it apparently deserted, Karkat thought it was their biggest break yet. Sollux was able to make quick work of the security systems, dismissing human technology as “eathy enough for wiggleth to crack,” and breaking them inside in a matter of minutes.

“This is kind of creepy,” John whispered as they walked through the narrow halls. Their footsteps clacked hard against the tile floor. It was the only sound apart from the hum of the fluorescent lights. On either side of the hall, steel doors were set at regular intervals. Sollux sighed each time one appeared. Opening them would require the hacking of many more defense systems, a job which would keep him exceedingly busy.

“Don’t worry,” Roxy said reassuringly. “You aren’t the only haxxor we’ve got. Me and Dirky will help out! Right?”

“Yeah,” Dirk said distantly. His melancholy had only grown worse as they entered the base. Karkat thought back to Jake’s excitement for battle with a pang. He would’ve loved this place.

“We must find someplace to set up camp,” said Kanaya. “This place cannot be built only of corridors.”

“What an astounding inference,” said Rose, smirking. “You must give me an insight to your brilliant understanding of human architecture.” She was holding Kanaya’s hand. When had that happened? Karkat shot Kanaya a knowing look, and she rolled her glance nuggets.

*Looks like I’m not the only one with shit going on in the red quadrant.*

Of course, he still didn’t really know if anything was going on in his.
Dave had his cartilaginous nub buried in his palmhusk again. “Just sending out more details to my followers,” he explained, not looking up. “The hype is too real. There are people already packing up and coming here, we’ll have to find accommodations for a shit ton of people.”

“They’d better be bringing their own food,” Karkat warned. “We can’t provide that much.”

“I know, I know. I’m tweeting it all out.” Dave finished tapping at his screen and shoved the palmhusk back into his pocket. “Don’t you trust me to guide an angry mob?”

“I’d sooner trust an oinkbeast to fly,” Karkat retorted.

Dave laughed. “I’ll never get tired of your weird alien names for shit. Oinkbeast. Fucking oinkbeast.”

Karkat bristled. “That’s not weird! Why, what do you call them?”

“Pigs.”

“Oh, right. Of course. And you call our vernacular weird?”

“Chill out, dude. I’m not making fun of you. It’s sort of endearing.”

Dave cast a not-so-subtle glance to Rose and Kanaya, then grabbed onto Karkat’s hand, trying for a smirk but only managing a goofy smile.

Karkat should have been paying attention to the battle plans being developed around him, but he was finding it rather difficult to concentrate.

Whatever. He would ask Kanaya to catch him up later.

For now, the feeling of Dave’s hand in his was enough to keep him occupied.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for taking so long to update,, here's some fluff to make up for it

only a couple chapters left >:^)
"Fire it, fire it up
This is our last chance
Stuck in the middle of the sinners, the sinners and saints"

-Fire It Up, Escape The Fate

The first arrivals came mere hours after the Resistance settled into their new base.

It started with a man and his daughter. Some ten minutes later, a pair of siblings arrived, then a lone woman, then an entire group of friends. The sudden crowd was nerve-wracking. Dave had never expected such a quick response to his digital cry for aid. If this was just the people who lived nearby, what would happen if people traveled from all over the country to join them? They might run out of space. Thankfully, most of them had come armed with supplies, but the sudden population boom was sure to cause some sort of trouble.

Dave made it very clear that he wanted no part in the management duties. He hung back with Karkat as Rose attempted to wrangle the excited throng into a more organized procession.

“All new arrivals, please proceed down the corridor to the right,” she called. “My friend John is waiting in the first room. Leave your food with him, if you’d please, then someone else will help you with sleeping arrangements.”

“Why do we have to leave our food?” a man grumbled. “I earned this stuff.”

“We must ration our resources. If there is one of us who happens to have less food, does that make them any less important? No. We must make sure everyone is fed,” Rose scolded. “We look after each other. That is what makes us different from those we fight against.”

The man looked unconvinced, but followed the herd down the hallway without further comment. Dave watched as they all moved past. In reality, there probably weren’t too many of them, but he had grown up in relative isolation; even the Resistance occasionally felt like a crowd. This was like being plunged directly into a sea of people. It was like drowning. He clung onto Karkat’s hand, his fingers going numb with the strength of his grip.

“Mommy, there are aliens here!” a little girl cried out. She wasn’t the first to make her concerns known. If they had been summoned by Dave’s tweets, they definitely knew about the diverse nature of the Resistance, but there was an underlying sense of tension just the same. Humans were quick to judge, and even quicker to doubt. They didn’t trust the Alternians.

Most of the trolls had slunk into corners, avoiding the suspicious looks cast over them. Karkat, however, stuck by Dave’s side. He couldn’t have left if he wanted to. If he let go of Dave’s hand, Dave would be swept away into the tide.

“These aliens are our friends,” Rose said to the girl. “They’re perfectly safe.”

Dave stifled a yawn. The crowd may have had his heart racing, but his limbs felt heavy with
exhaustion. Darkness had long since fallen outside the base. He needed to sleep, but he knew that wasn’t likely to happen. People would keep streaming inside, they would need directions, he would be expected to help. He couldn’t rest. Not yet.

“Hey,” Karkat said. “You look like you’re about to fall over. Do you wanna find somewhere quiet to sleep? I’m sure the others can manage without us for a few hours.”

“No,” Dave protested. “I’m fine, I’m just,” he held back another yawn, “just a little tired.”

“You need to sleep,” said Karkat, rolling his eyes. “Stop being a moron. You look exhausted, and your arm is still all fucked up.” He prodded the burn on Dave’s arm, raising an eyebrow as Dave winced. “See? If you don’t come with me, I’ll fucking drag you, and all these innocent people will think I’m a bloodthirsty alien who’s about to stab you in the back. We wouldn’t want that, now would we?”

“That’s blackmail,” Dave said weakly, but he couldn’t bring himself to object further. Karkat guided him away from the entrance. Dave’s eyelids drooped as they walked, and by the time they found a secluded corner to curl up in, he was barely conscious.

“G’night,” he mumbled.

“Good night, Dave.”

The last thing Dave saw before he drifted off to sleep was Karkat, smiling softly down at him.

***

“Time to get up.” Someone prodded Dave on the shoulder. “Wakey wakey eggs and aliens.”

He groaned. “Five more minutes?”

“Your boyfriend needs you, dude. Get your ass up.”

Dave opened his eyes to a squint, recognizing Dirk as the one hovering over him. “Wha’s goin’ on? What do you mean, ‘boyfrie–’”

“Karkat’s mom is here,” Dirk said shortly. “He’s a little shaken. They haven’t talked yet, but he wants you there when they do.”

Dave sat bolt upright. “I’m awake.” He rolled onto his feet, stretching his limbs as he did so. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so rested. “Shit, how late did I sleep? Where are they?”

“It’s, like, eleven. Karkat’s down the hall, two doors to the left. Delilah’s in the next room over. I’m gonna take her in when you’re all ready.”

Dave was out the door in an instant, calling a quick “Thanks!” before he was hurrying down the hall.

What do you mean, “boyfriend?”

Dave shook his head. No time for that. He couldn’t dwell on his and Karkat’s relationship, or what he hoped it might be, not when Karkat’s emotional life was so unstable. He had to help his friend. Reuniting with a family member he hadn’t seen in years, and couldn’t even remember? Dave couldn’t imagine what it would be like. If he was asked out of the blue to meet up with Bro, he’d be panicking. Romance would be the last thing on his mind.

He burst through the door Dirk had described. “Karkat, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to sleep in, I
Karkat was seated at a long table, his legs pulled up to his chest. He looked up at Dave’s entrance, and what had clearly been a fearful expression was replaced with a smile. “Don’t be stupid. You needed the rest.”

Behind his shades, Dave rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but you need me. Answer my question. Are you okay?” He took a seat across from Karkat.

“I’m nervous,” Karkat said quietly. “I still don’t remember much about her. I think I loved her when I was younger, but I… I don’t know if that’s true anymore. I mean, I didn’t grow up with her. We never bonded. I don’t really know who she is. What if she expects me to act like nothing’s happened?”

Dave sat back in his chair, thinking for a moment. “Well, she didn’t get the chance to bond with you either. She doesn’t know the person you’ve grown into. I’m sure she still loves you, and she must’ve missed you like crazy, but… chances are, she’s just as nervous as you.”

Karkat looked surprised. “You really think so?”

Dave laughed. “How would you feel if your kid was raised on another planet and then suddenly reappeared? Hell yeah, she’s nervous.”

Karkat’s smile widened. “I guess that would be pretty fucking weird. Can you have Dirk bring her in, please?”

“’Course I can.” Dave rose from his seat. As he headed outside, he found himself combing his fingers through his hair, trying in vain to tame the bedhead that had formed in the night. He wanted to make a good impression on this Delilah. After all, he was Karkat’s best friend now; the approval of Karkat’s mother would be essential.

He poked his head into the next room over. Dirk was leaning against a wall, chatting with a woman. “He’s ready,” said Dave. The woman looked up eagerly.

Dave could instantly see the resemblance between her and Karkat. Her skin was caramel instead of grey, and she lacked the horns and fangs that made trolls so intimidating, but she had the same sharply defined eyes and short stature as her son. Curly black hair tumbled over her shoulders. Somehow, she had retained a sense of style through the planetary invasion; bracelets jingled at her wrists as she skipped up to Dave.

“Hello, I’m Delilah! Are you Dave? Dirk has been telling me all about you. It’s a pleasure.” Her eyes were brilliant green, and, to Dave’s surprise, full of affection. “Thank you for being there for my son. From what I hear, he’s had a very tough time since he was taken to Alternia. He needs someone like you around.” She squeezed Dave’s shoulder, her eyes crinkling into a smile that was somehow reminiscent of a cat.

“Uh, I feel like Dirk probably exaggerated somethings,” Dave said, glancing at Dirk.

“Boyfriend.”

He hoped Dirk hadn’t used that word in front of Delilah… But, strangely enough, he found he didn’t mind it otherwise. He was pondering this when Delilah made a noise of disagreement.

“Nonsense! Karkat asked to talk to you before me, didn’t he?” Delilah nodded wisely. “He cares
about you.”

“Um,” said Dave, heat flooding across his cheeks. “Should we go say hi to him?”

“Yes. Bring me to him,” she ordered. She followed Dave into the hall and watched as he knocked on
the door.

“Karkat, Delilah’s here,” he said.

“Don’t just stand there like you missed the last train to idiot-ville, then,” Karkat said from inside. His
words were scathing, but the tremor in his voice betrayed his true anxiety. “Have some fucking
hospitality. Introduce us.”

Dave looked worriedly to Delilah, but she was doubled over with laughter. He raised an eyebrow.
Mothers truly were strange creatures.

She stepped inside the room, still giggling. “Oh my goodness. You’re just like your father. That man
could spit profanities that’d make a priest cry, let me tell you…” Dave watched as she stuck out her
hand. “Hi there. It’s been a while. I’m Delilah, your mom.”

Karkat stood up cautiously, taking her hand and giving it a quick shake. “Hi. I… I’m Karkat.”

He looked past Delilah, his eyes landing on Dave. “Well? Are you coming in?”

Dave nodded. He scurried over to Karkat’s side, ignoring the feelings of awkwardness that
threatened to crush him.

“This is Dave,” Karkat introduced him. “He’s super fucking great.”

“We’ve met,” Delilah smiled. “And I must agree.” Dave flushed again, and she promptly pulled out
a chair and sat down.

“Now. Karkat, tell me everything. I need to know what’s gone on for the past fifteen years. Or, wait.
How many sweeps would that be?” She counted on her fingers. “Seven? Or did the space travel
screw up your individual flow of time?”

“Um, it’s about seven sweeps, yeah. I’m not sure. Relativity was never really my thing…” Karkat
smiled nervously. “But it’s been a pretty long time. You really want to hear everything?”

“Yes,” Delilah insisted. “I need to know exactly how much revenge must be enacted.”

Karkat fidgeted in his seat. “Well… I’ve got red blood, so my life was just a mess of secrecy and
discrimination. But you probably know that. I don’t know what to say.”

“At least you survived,” she said sadly. “Your father and I, we knew it was risky to send you back to
Alternia. I prayed every day that you would live to see adulthood. But keeping you here on Earth
would be just as bad; we would have to hide you, and physically, you took after your father, so
many of the conditions here wouldn’t suit you. He was summoned back to Alternia and insisted on
bringing you.”

“So, he was a scout?” Dirk said sharply.

Delilah rolled her eyes. “Don’t sound so suspicious, Dirk. He was a scout for the Imperial army, yes,
and it’s thanks to him that the invasion was delayed so long.”

“He left me behind,” Karkat said quietly. “Once reached the planet, he must have left. The only
memories I have of him are from Earth. Why?”

Delilah frowned. “Don’t you know his story? The legend of the Signless Sufferer?”

“Oh… Wait, what? That happened after I was born?” Karkat looked shocked. “I’ve never heard that before. I always thought it happened ages ago.”

“That’s what the Condesce wants you to think. I can’t imagine it took much effort; just slaughter the survivors and erase all records, and you’ve got an entire new generation that’s unaware of recent history. She would never want you to know that she’s still recovering from a large-scale rebellion. The Sufferer didn’t intend to leave you, he didn’t even intend to lead a revolution, but things just sort of snowballed. He couldn’t stay with you. It would have put you in even more danger.”

Dave didn’t know much about the history of Alternia, but this revelation had Karkat stunned.

“You know,” Delilah said gently, “looking at you now, I think we made the wrong decision.” She reached out to touch Karkat’s face, and he didn’t move away.

“We should have kept you here.”

***

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] opened memo on board OPERATION SAVE THE WORLD --

CG: LISTEN UP FUCKHEADS.

CG: I’VE ADDED EVERYONE TO THIS MEMO, AND YES, THAT MEANS *EVERYONE.* GAMZEE, TAVROS, FEFERI, I’M LOOKING AT YOU. WELCOME BACK, I GUESS.

AT: THANKS KARKAT, ;)

CC: HI!!!

AT: iTS,,, uH, gOOD TO BE BACK,,

CG: OKAY SHUT UP NOW.

CG: WE’RE REALLY BUSY OVER HERE SO I’M GOING TO MAKE THIS QUICK. FEFERI, IS THERE ANY WAY YOU CAN GET TO THE PLANET’S SURFACE?

CC: Ummm…

CC: I’m not shore! 38O

CC: There are teleporters in the highbloods’ quarters, but I’d never be allowed up there alone.

CC: I probably wouldn’t be able to get them working anyway.

TA: could ii?

CC: I’d hate to shove that job onto you!!! You do so much work for us anyway 38T

CC: How long did it take you to break down the firewalls? Weeks?

CG: WE DON’T HAVE THAT KIND OF TIME.
TA: ii know ii know

TA: iiit wa2 ju2t an iidea god

CG: WHATEVER, WE'LL THINK ABOUT THIS LATER. GAMZEE, IS THERE ANY WAY YOU COULD GET AWAY FROM YOUR SQUADRON?

TC: im sure there motherfuckin is.

TC: HONK.

TC: :o)

CG: OKAY GOOD. THAT'S ONE HURDLE OUT OF THE WAY. I'LL MESSAGE YOU DIRECTIONS TO US, START HEADING OUR WAY AS SOON AS YOU CAN.

TC: you got it brother.

CG: TAVROS.

CG: HAVE YOU GOTTEN ANY STRONGER OVER THE COURSE OF THIS INVASION? LIKE, AT ALL?

AG: Is that even a question that needs asking?

CG: GEE, VRISKA, I REALLY DON'T REMEMBER ADDRESSING YOU.

AT: uH,, i tHINK I HAVE, aCTUALLY!

CG: THANK FUCK.

CG: WHEN YOU GOT THE USE OF YOUR LEGS BACK, YOU BECAME A LITTLE LESS WORTHLESS. BUT WITH THE USE OF YOUR PAN? YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO EXIST AS A SEMI-FUNCTIONAL TROLL. CONGRATULATIONS.

CG: EQUIUS, I NEVER GOT THE CHANCE TO THANK YOU FOR MAKING THOSE ROBOT LEGS ALL THOSE SWEEPS AGO.

CG: WELL, ACTUALLY, I DID. I JUST CHOSE NOT TO BECAUSE YOU'RE DISGUSTING.

CG: ANYWAY, THANKS FOR GIVING TAVROS A SLIM CHANCE AT SURVIVAL.

CT: D --> You are most welcome

EB: wait, robot legs?? thats so cool!

CG: JOHN I KNOW YOU’RE PART OF THIS MEMO BUT AT THE MOMENT YOU REALLY AREN’T RELEVANT SO IF YOU COULD SHUT YOUR GODDAMN MEAL TUNNEL THAT’D BE REALLY COOL.

GC: 4GR33D!!!

EB: hey, i dont think you qualify as relevant either!

CG: I REFUSE TO LET THIS MEMO DEVOLVE INTO INANE BLACKROM FUCKERY.
CG banned EB from responding to memo.

CG banned GC from responding to memo.

TG: wait am i relevant enough to talk

TG: am i dominating the headlines

TG: am i “the toast of the town”, as the kids say

TG: am i hot shit

TG: am i the hottest shit

TG: karkat do you think im hot and/or shit check y for yes n for no

CG: FOR THE SAKE OF PRINCIPLE, I’M GOING TO SAY YOU AREN’T ALLOWED TO TALK.

TG: answer my other question though

TG: cmon karkat i need specifics here am i hot shit or what

CG: OH MY GOD, SHUT UP OR I’M BANNING YOU.

CG: WE’RE GETTING SIDETRACKED. TAVROS, DO YOU THINK YOU’D BE ABLE TO SNEAK AWAY FROM YOUR GROUP?

AT: uHHH,,

AT: i dONT KNOW,, mAYBE?

TC: you know.

TC: IF YOU ALL UP AND WANTED ME TO.

TC: i could pick a brother up on my way to you.

TC: HONK HONK.

CG: YOU’RE A LIFESAVER, GAMZEE. THANK YOU.

TA: wait wait wait ii know you 2aiid we’d talk about ff later but ii ju2t had another iidea

TA: what iiif we dont need to get her to the 2urface?

TA: we need 2omebody on the in2iide, 2he could work for u2 diirectly from the 2hiip.

CC: 38O

TA: ii dont wanna do thii2 two you ff but

TA: could you maybe liike

TA: hiijack 2ome gun2? iiif iiit ii2nt two ri2ky?

CC: Of course I could!!
CC: Most of the highbloods here are bored out of their pans, and the ones who are actually doing things are only paying attention to what’s going on down on Earth. They’d never expect an attack from the inside!!!!

CC: To be honest, I could probably take over the whole ship if I wanted!

CC: I’m not quite as helpless as you think I am 38P

CC: There aren’t too many trolls up here, and I’m a higher caste than them anyway, so they can’t stop me no matter what I do!!!

CG: FINALLY, SOME GOOD NEWS.

TT: And I hate to interrupt said good news, but…

TT: The people are getting antsy. You should come out to the meeting hall, Dave.

TG: i didnt even know we had a meeting hall

TT: We do as of two hours ago.

TT: Dirk, could you stop by the weapons department on your way? We need to look over our arsenal.

TT: This is a military base, Rose. I can’t just bring all the weapons to you. I might be ripped as hell, but the last time I checked, I can’t bench-press a dozen armored trucks. Why don’t you go yourself?

TT: All right, I’ll lead everyone there. Let’s reconvene in a moment to discuss a battle plan.

TT: The Condesce’s ship has grown alarmingly close.

CG: GOD DAMN IT ROSE. WE WERE REALLY ON A ROLL HERE.

TT: My apologies. I’m just being truthful.

TT: Now, as you and Dave are practically surgically attached by this moment, I expect to see you both in the next five minutes. Don’t be late.

CG: WHY DON’T YOU SURGICALLY ATTACH YOURSELF TO THE CONDESCE AND MUTUALLY SIP A VAT OF BATTERY ACID THROUGH SWIRLY STRAWS.

TG: well be right there

-- CG closed memo --

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Rose stood on a table, pinching the bridge of her nose. Dave thought he could hear her sigh over the rumble of noise emanating from the crowd before her.

“Please, could you all be quiet!” she shouted. Her voice was barely audible. “Sir, please remove your child from that tank. These weapons are real, and they are dangerous!”

Dave nudged Karkat. “I think she needs some of your expertise.”

“You humans,” Karkat muttered. “So disorganized.” He jumped up onto the table beside Rose. He
might have been half a foot shorter than her, but his appearance managed to bring the volume level down to something more manageable.

“Listen up, you fucks!” he yelled. Rose winced. “This is an organized rebellion. Emphasis on organized. If you could shut up for five seconds, you might be aware that the boss battle is rapidly approaching. The Condesce is coming for us; she could be here in hours. We need to get a battle plan together!”

“Bomb her!” someone shouted.

Dave glanced at Dirk. “Do we have bombs?”

“Nah. Although…” He looked thoughtful. “We might be able to build one.”

“A bomb isn’t going to do shit against the Condesce,” Vriska snapped. “It’d be like throwing spitballs at her.”

Karkat sighed. “Okay, okay. Does anyone here have much battle experience, besides me and my friends?” He looked out into the crowd. No one raised their hand. Dave figured there had to be at least a few people who knew how to fight, but they didn’t want to come forward.

“Thanks for making this so much easier,” Karkat growled. “Right, looks like we’ll have to rely on what we already know.” He climbed down from the table, gathering his friends into a huddle.

“Anybody here who’s not human, listen to me. Remember when we first landed? Earth was fighting back. The fact that they weren’t slaughtered instantly means they must have been doing something right. What were they doing?”

“I thtand by what I thaid before,” Sollux shrugged. “If the Condeth didn’t have thuch thtrong defentheth, we’d have a fighting chanthe againtht her. Human weaponry’th pretty powerful.”

“Defenses,” Karkat muttered. “Okay. Fuck. We don’t even know how they work, how are we supposed to get around them?”

“Don’t look at me. I’m not that good of a hacker.”

“Maybe we don’t need a hacker,” Dave said slowly. “What about that girl? Feferi? I’m assuming that the defenses across ships would be of the same type… She could find out how they work, tell us, and maybe even help us break them down.”

“She was joking about hijacking her ship, but it could actually be really helpful,” Terezi remarked. “It’d definitely give us much more firepower.”

“We can’t put her in that type of danger,” said Eridan. “She’s one troll against a bunch of highblood officers. Even if they’re reluctant to hurt her because of her blood, they’d eventually give in. She couldn’t do it alone.”

Karkat pursed his lips.

“Yeah, that’s true. Okay. What else could we try?”

“Wait,” Dave said suddenly. “Maybe she doesn’t have to do it alone. She said there were teleporters, right? Instead of taking over the whole ship, she could just take control of them, and then couple of us could beam up in time to help her take over the rest.”
“That… ithn’t a bad plan,” Sollux said, looking surprised. “There are about a million wayth it could go wrong, but in our prethent thircumthtantheth, that’th a pretty thmall number.”

“We don’t have enough time to think of something else,” said Rose. “I say we go for it. All in agreement, say ‘aye’.”

A chorus of ‘aye’s sounded through the huddle.

“I’ll tell Fef what’s goin’ on,” said Eridan. “And then I’ll be one of the people who goes up to the ship with her.” He glared around the circle, as if daring anyone to challenge him.

“I’ll go too,” said Sollux.

Karkat surveyed the group. “Take a few others with you… Vriska, you go, and Nepeta. And Roxy, if you’re comfortable.”

Roxy’s jaw dropped. “Me? Hell yeah! I wanna steal an alien’s ride!”

“Me too!” said John. “Can I come? Please?”

Karkat rolled his eyes. “Sure. Whatever you want. But the point of this is to win a fucking war, not to be a pair of squawking fangirls, got it?”

“Got it!” they said in unison.

“That leaves the rest of us on the surface,” Rose murmured. “We’ll need to assemble defenses of our own. I’ve become somewhat acquainted with our new allies, I think they’ll listen if I break them up into groups. We need people outside watching the skies, and while we need to modify the weapons we have to suit our purposes, we may need to build additional ones from scratch… And that’s not even taking into account the need for fighters.”

“I will assist you in the division process,” Kanaya volunteered.

“I’ll work on weapons,” said Dirk. “Jane, you wanna lead the team outside?” She nodded.

Dave was about to volunteer to fight, when he was elbowed from the huddle. Delilah forced her way into the center.

“I want to help,” she announced. “I’m the oldest out of any of you, and I can say with utmost certainty that I’m more familiar with Alternian ways than any other human. The Sufferer taught me quite a lot. You’ll need me.”

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” said Rose, sticking out her hand. “You would be Delilah Vantas?”

“That’s me!” Delilah smiled and shook Rose’s hand. “You’re handling all those people very well, you know that?” She nodded her head back at the crowd waiting behind them. “I’ve never seen a more mature young lady.” Rose looked pleased with herself.

“Ah, thank you. But it’s not as if I’ve done it alone. We will most definitely be needing your aid. How much of our discussion have you been listening to?”

“Enough,” said Delilah. “I want to beam up with you. Experienced though you are, you’re still so young. I can’t let you go up there by yourselves.”

“Still chasing the greater good, I see,” Dirk said under his breath. But he meant no harm; the quirk of his lips betrayed that much.
Delilah rolled her eyes. “It’s called being a responsible adult, Dirk. You should try it sometime.” She winked, but her playful attitude vanished as she turned to Karkat.

“I want you to come with me.”


“Because I want to be there to protect you, of course. I’m not taking no for an answer. I’ve missed out on most of your life, I’m not about to let you die before I’ve properly gotten to know you,” she said sadly. “Please, Karkat.”

“If he goes up, I go up, too,” Dave said immediately. Delilah raised an eyebrow.

“What makes you so sure, Mr. Valiant?”

“Because I won’t take no for an answer, either,” he said firmly. “If he goes, I go.”

Karkat looked alarmed. “Dave, no!”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s dangerous!”

“I know,” said Dave. “That’s why I’m going, dumbfuck. You think your mom’s the only one who wants to protect you?” The words slipped out before he could catch himself. He hadn’t meant to sound so… invested.

But he was invested. The idea of Karkat teleporting up to some dangerous environment where Dave couldn’t reach him, possibly to never return, made his heart ache. He couldn’t allow it to happen. He wouldn’t.

“You don’t have to protect me,” Karkat said quietly.

“But I want to,” said Dave.

Delilah looked between the two of them, unsure.

Karkat exhaled hard through his nose. “You’re so fucking stubborn. What’s wrong with you? Why would you risk your life for me?”

“Because you’re fucking important to me!”

“Oh.” Karkat flushed. For some reason, he didn’t look as if he’d expected that answer.

He looked at Delilah.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But I don’t think I can go with you.”

“Karkat—”

“I can’t,” Karkat interrupted. “Besides, I’ll be safer down here. You aren’t letting me down or anything. Letting me stay is the best thing you could do to protect me.”

Delilah looked him up and down, frowning. “I guess you’re right. But you have to promise me you’ll be safe.” She pointed to Dave. “You keep him safe for me.”
“I will,” Dave promised. “I swear I will.”

Karkat took Dave’s hand, and they backed away from the huddle. The room had previously been filled with a low rumble of chatter, but when they appeared, the crowd went silent. Dave looked across the sea of faces, ignoring how it made his stomach twinge.

Karkat squeezed his hand.

“Time to get this party started,” Dave said quietly. “Let’s do this.”

“Yeah,” Karkat echoed. “Let’s do this.”
Karkat stayed inside the base as long as he could, but after a few hours of waiting, it became clear that the real fight was outside. The rumbling of the ship grew louder and louder, until he had to shout to be heard.

“Team one have already beamed up, they’ll send progress reports if they can! At this point, all we can do is hope. Team two is on the roof. Team three is outside with the trucks, four has the guns, and five has whatever weapons people brought with them. Six is still working on the bomb.”

“It needs to be finished!” Kanaya said loudly. Her chainsaw was drawn, but the rev of its engine was lost in the roar of machinery all around them. “We’ll have no chance until we--”

She was interrupted by a colossal boom. Dust trickled from the ceiling above. She looked around, panicked, but Jade’s voice was already crackling from the intercom system.

“The roof is caving in on the south side,” she announced. “It’s still mostly safe, but if you’re in the building and you aren’t part of team six, you should get out. Karkat, Dave, Kanaya, Rose-- I’m talking to you.”

“Not a chance,” said Karkat. “Team six needs people defending them.”

“Are you guys the only ones left?” Jade asked. “Oh. I thought there were still some civilians hanging around. In that case, do whatever, go help Dirk. But if you see anyone else, get them out.”

“Nobody here but us chickens,” said Dave. Outwardly, he was the picture of boredom, but Karkat knew better than to judge him based on expression alone. Why did he have to put up that tough-guy front? It was so easy to see through. Karkat grabbed onto his hand, scowling, and resolved to give him a lecture if they survived the coming battle.
“Come on, then. Let’s go.” Karkat tugged him towards the stairs, and they dashed down as quickly as they could, finally coming to a doorway. The sound of scraping metal could be heard from inside. When Karkat peeked in, his pump biscuit sank.

**It still isn’t done.**

Dirk had his hands inside a husk of metal, his tongue poking out in concentration. “Nobody distract me,” he warned. “I don’t want this to blow up in our faces.”

“As if it could,” Terezi grumbled. “At this point, I’d be surprised if it could light a candle.”

“Then keep helping!” Dirk snapped.

“Is there anything we can do?” asked Kanaya.

“No. All this is a stab in the dark, really. If we can finish it in time, we will, and if it does any damage, it will. Otherwise, this has been a truly gigantic waste of time,” he said.

“Just go fight, Kanaya,” Terezi said wearily. “All the other people this team have already left. I would’ve gone with them, I’m no good with machines, but I couldn’t leave this lunk here by himself.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” said Karkat. “You need to be protecting each other. That’s why we came down here,” he said, gesturing to Dave, Rose, and Kanaya. “To help watch your backs.”

“The others need you more than we do,” said Terezi, exasperated. “Just go, Karkat. We’ll be fine.”

Karkat sat down beside the doorway and stared up at Terezi, unmoving.

“Okay!” said Terezi, throwing her hands in the air. “Be that way. Just don’t distract Dirk, this is actually sort of important.”

“Deal,” Karkat said smugly.

Dave scooted as close as he could to Karkat, and Kanaya sat a foot or so away. It felt weird not to have her close, but she gave Karkat a knowing look, and he couldn’t stop himself from blushing. The fact that she didn’t mind his feelings for Dave was a huge relief, but her subtle digs made it extremely difficult to keep Dave from noticing. Stupid loving moirail with her teasing. Karkat could always dig back at the way Rose was nestled in Kanaya’s arms, but he was a little busy.

Dave leaned his head against Karkat’s shoulder, and they watched Terezi and Dirk working. Terezi wasn’t as bad with machinery as she made herself out to be. With Dirk’s instruction, she contributed the best she could, fitting pieces together and fusing them together with a long torch that made Karkat incredibly nervous. He made a mental note to make sure the tool left her hands once the job was over.

Jade’s regular reports didn’t help the mood. Every so often, her voice would come through the loudspeaker, detailing the fight going on outside. It was a reminder of exactly how bad their situation was. Locked away beneath layers of protective concrete and metal, Karkat could almost pretend things were okay. The noises of the fight had dulled, like the faint rolling of thunder, and as long as he didn’t think too hard, he could imagine that the Condesce’s ship was anywhere but above them. He could imagine that this might not be the last time he would get to cling onto Dave’s hand.

But as Jade outlined the destruction tearing through their mess of an army, the bomb shelter began to feel less protective and more like a prison.
Dave was the first one to stand up.

“I can’t stay here,” he said, agitated. “I’m sorry, I just-- I can’t. I need to go help.”

“I’ll go with you,” Karkat said instantly. He hauled himself up, using Dave for support, then looked at Kanaya and Rose. “Are you staying?”

“I think that would be best,” said Kanaya, troubled. “But I do not wish for you to go alone.”

“I’m not alone, I’ve got him,” said Karkat, jerking his head at Dave. “Loser though he may be, I don’t think he’ll let me die. We do have a lot of people fighting with us, Kanaya. I’ll be okay.”

“What if it isn’t enough?” she fretted.

“I’ll be fine,” he said gently. He cupped her cheek in one hand, stroking a thumb across her chin before letting her go. She sighed.

“Do you promise not to be reckless?”

“I promise.”

Kanaya gave a small smile. “Then go. Be a hero.”

Karkat rolled his glance nuggets, then took hold of Dave’s shirt and dragged him away.

It was odd, heading back up the stairs. The explosions above them kept getting louder and louder. With each one, Dave flinched. He could pretend all he wanted, but he was scared, and Karkat knew it. The sword in his hand might have made him dangerous, but it didn’t make him any less fragile.

“I’m not gonna let anything happen to you,” Karkat whispered.

“S not what I’m worried about,” Dave whispered back. “I have to make sure I can protect you.”

“Shut up,” said Karkat, flushing. “That’s… You know it’s okay to be scared for yourself, too, right?”

For some reason, Dave looked surprised. “I… Yeah. I’m not, though, to be honest. I don’t really care if I get hurt. I just,” he winced, “don’t like this environment, you know? The noises, the pressure, all that shit. I just want to get this fight over with.”

The intercom sputtered to life above them. “Attention, Dave and Karkat!” said Jade. “Rose said you were on your way. Are you planning on arriving before tomorrow?”

“We’re on our way,” said Karkat. “What area should we head for?”

“Doesn’t matter, just get out of there. If you’re not in the basement, it’s getting really dangerous. In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re still under fire, and that means bombs could be dropping any minute! You’re lucky the roof hasn’t fallen in on your heads!”

Karkat glanced worriedly at the floor. “Way to make me feel good about leaving Kanaya behind.”

“She’s in the basement, she’s fine. You and Dave need to worry about yourselves. Meet me at the main entrance, okay? It’s not safe to fight from the roof anymore, so we’re all on the ground. Please hurry.”

“On our way,” said Dave. He sped down the hall, Karkat fighting to keep pace with him. It had only
just begun to sink in that they were headed for all-out war. This would be the worst fight they had ever experienced. Karkat’s pump biscuit leapt into his throat, and he found himself stopping, grabbing Dave’s arm.

“Wait.”

“What is it?” Dave asked, turning around.

“I…”

Shit, what am I doing?

This might be the last time Karkat could talk to Dave in peace. If he didn’t say something now, he might never get the chance. Dave might never know how he felt. Karkat felt a little stupid for still having romance on his pan while the world was literally ending, but he had nothing to lose. After all, the world was literally ending.

“I think we should talk,” he said tentatively. “Before the fight begins.”

“About what?” said Dave, sounding equally as nervous. What would he have to be nervous about? Karkat was the one who was about to spill his biggest secret.

“Us,” Karkat said quietly.

“Oh,” said Dave. He tapped the tip of his sword against the ground, looking away. Karkat scowled.

“Look at me, douche. And take the shades off, I’m being serious.”

Dave pushed his sunglasses up to his forehead, but he still refused to look Karkat in the face. His cheeks were tinted bright pink.

“Look, I…” God. When had speaking become so difficult? It felt like Karkat’s pump biscuit was beating too loudly for his voice to be heard. “Um. So, we’re best friends.” That sounded wrong. Fuck. Karkat was mentally tearing his hair out. “And that means a lot to me, uh…” Fuck. Dave looked confused, and not in a good way.

Jade’s voice cut into Karkat’s faltering monologue. “Before tomorrow, please!”

“Fuck. Um. Later, okay?” Karkat said, slightly desperate. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t get the words out, so he’d just procrastinate until later, hoping there would even be a later.

They’d better not die before his moment of confession.

***

Thankfully, Dave didn’t allow the situation between them to become awkward. He just acted as if it had never happened. Karkat followed him outside, where Jade was waiting for them, and the sight of the battleground was enough to put all thoughts of drama out of his pan.

“Shit,” he said, awe-struck.

There was the Condesce’s ship. It hovered almost directly above them, a towering omen of death in scarlet. Scattered across the ground were the forces of the Resistance. The very earth shook with the force of the shots being hurled toward the Condesce, but each bullet was no more than a pebble in the face of her shields. They fizzled with red and blue light before they could come close to the ship, then fell from the sky, useless.
“Now would be an awesome time for Feferi to figure out how to take those defenses down,” Karkat murmured.

Dave nodded. “Do you-- shit. Duck!” He shoved Karkat to the ground, and a moment later, the air was ripped apart by an earth-shattering boom. Dave held himself in a protective stance over Karkat until the noise subsided. Karkat’s auricular sponge clots were left ringing.

“Shit,” he said hoarsely.

“We’re in over our heads,” Jade muttered. “That was one shot from her ship. One. A few more like it, and she’ll completely wipe out the base. We’ve got some bombs, and all our guns and stuff, but none of it will do anything until her defenses drop. And we’ll definitely need her defenseless if we want to use Dirk’s project.”

“I’m gonna check in on Feferi,” said Karkat. “Gimme a second.” He opened the Trollian app on his helmet.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] opened memo on board OPERATION SAVE THE WORLD --

CG: HOW’S EVERYTHING GOING UP THERE.

CG: …

CG: HELLO?

CG: ANYONE?

CA: were pretty busy up here kar no time for chitchat

CG: IS EVERYTHING OKAY?

CA: whatd i literally just say

TG: were okay! jus a bit achotic

TG: *just *chaotic goddamn i cant type while airborne

TG: fightin some aliens yknow th deal

EB: karkat, your mom is kind of a badass! :P

EB: shes really good with a blaster. she shot like two trolls already!!

CG: OKAY BUT ARE YOU GUYS CLOSE TO TAKING OVER THE SHIP??

CG: WE REALLY NEED YOUR HELP.

TG: patience grasshopper were gettin therer

CC: Thank goodness there aren’t very many officers up here. We’re pretty much evenly matched, but believe me, they aren’t happy! 38T

CC: I’m reely sorry karcrab but we should go now!! We can’t afford to be distracted.

CC: BY-------E!!!

CG: WAIT DON’T GO!
CG: FEFERI?
CG: GUYS?
CG: FUCK.

TG: less talk more fight
TG: peace out

CG: OKAY. GOOD LUCK, I GUESS. PLEASE HURRY.
CG: AAAND YOU’RE GONE HUH.
CG: GOD, IT FEELS WEIRD TO BE SEPARATED.
CG: GAMZEE? TAVROS? ARE YOU GUYS THERE?

TC: hey there brother.

CG: OH, HI. I’M GLAD YOU ANSWERED. ARE YOU ALMOST HERE?

TC: HONK HONK.

CG: THAT DOES ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO ANSWER MY QUESTION.

TC: i was motherfuckin getting to that.

TC: YOU KNOW, YOU SEEM A LITTLE DOWN.

TC: but i got some news that might make you start gettin your good feelings on.

CG: WHAT IS IT?

TC: LOOK UP, MOTHERFUCKER.

-- CG closed memo. --

Karkat shoved his visor up, squinting out across the lawn.

“Holy shit,” he said out loud.

Standing a few hundred feet away was a troll with a pair of juggling clubs in hand. He was somehow taller than Karkat remembered, but it was unmistakably Gamzee.

His helmet pinged. Waiting for him was a message:

TC: found you.

Karkat squeezed Dave’s hand. “Be right back.”

“Wait, where are you going?” called Jade. Karkat pretended not to hear. He was racing out across the grass towards his friend, not hesitating before slamming into him.

“Jesus nookshitting Christ,” he said, voice muffled in Gamzee’s side. “I missed you, you dumb fuck.”
“Aww. Ain’t that sweet. I missed you too, brother.” Gamzee patted his nugbone. Karkat backed away, staring up at his friend.

“I don’t believe it. You did get taller.”

Gamzee laughed. “I don’t think I motherfuckin’ did. It’s just that I all up and stopped slouching, see?” He let his shoulders fall forward, and suddenly, he looked a little more familiar. But in a second, he straightened back up. It really did make a remarkable difference. His new posture didn’t just alter his height; it made him seem… intimidating. The bloodied clubs in his hands definitely didn’t help the image.

Karkat did a double take.

_Holy shit, that’s blood._

“Gamzee,” he said. “You’ve been fighting.”

Gamzee snorted. “Course I have. What else would I be all up and doing? We’re at war, brother, and I ain’t so keen on losing.”

Karkat had trouble imagining Gamzee laying a hand on any living creature, much less slaughtering trolls. But the sheer amount of color decorating his clubs said that was exactly what he had been doing.

It was different, it was surprising, and it was a little fucking scary.

“Where’s Tavros?” said Karkat, steering the conversation away from topics he really didn’t want to think about. “You said you’d pick him up, right?”

“Oh, he didn’t make it.”

Karkat blinked.

“I’m sorry, he what?”

“He didn’t motherfuckin’ make it,” Gamzee repeated.

“Oh my god,” Karkat whispered. “Gamzee, I’m so sorry.” The fact that Gamzee had been flushed for Tavros was no secret; Tavros had been the only one not to realize. Karkat couldn’t imagine how Gamzee must have been feeling. Tavros had always been the weakest of the lot, but Karkat hadn’t ever imagined he’d actually die.

But then again, he hadn’t thought Jake would actually die, either.

“It’s no big deal, my brother,” Gamzee shrugged. “See, we were gettin’ our escape on, but he decided the wicked slaughterfest wasn’t so much his deal. Decided to get in the motherfuckin’ way. And we couldn’t be havin’ that.”

Karkat felt his pump biscuit stop beating.

“Gamzee,” he said slowly. “There… There aren’t any troll soldiers in this fight. It’s just the Condesce.” He pointed to Gamzee’s clubs. “So where did that come from?”

“Didn’t you motherfuckin’ understand me?” Gamzee said quietly. “My squadron wasn’t so chill with their leader all up and motherfuckin’ leavin’ them behind. They needed some convincing.”
“And Tavros got in the way,” Karkat said faintly. There was a patch of brown on the club in Gamzee’s right hand.

“That’s right,” said Gamzee, a grin spreading across his face.

_Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck._

Befriending a purple-blood had always been risky. They were all psychotic, except Gamzee. He was the exception to the rule. But then again, he was always stoned off his ass. If he snapped…

“Have you had any sopor lately?” Karkat asked, his voice shaking.

Gamzee’s grin widened. Each of his teeth was on full display, long and sharp as a blade. “Why the fuck would I have? I don’t _need_ that shit. It was all up in my pan for so long, brother, it was clouding my senses. Makin’ me not want to fight. Peace and love and all that shit. But there ain’t no room for peace and love in a war like this one. It’s kill or motherfuckin’ be killed, and _I ain’t gonna die today, brother._”


He only managed a few steps before he felt the hand on his back.

“Why so shy?” Gamzee purred. “I all up and found my calling, Karkat. I woulda thought you’d be interested in _congratulating_ me.”

“Yeah, okay, congratulations,” Karkat babbled. Please don’t kill me please don’t kill me oh god please don’t kill me. He didn’t turn around, just stood there, frozen. He didn’t want to see Gamzee’s face. He didn’t want to watch--

Dave.

Dave was still standing by the edge of the base, looking puzzled. Karkat put all the terror he was feeling onto his face and mouthed, _“HELP ME!”_ 

Dave’s face hardened. Jade tossed him a blaster, and he raised it without hesitation. Karkat heard Gamzee snarl, but he was too busy dropping to the ground to watch, he didn’t want to watch--

_Zap._

Karkat kept his hands over his glance nuggets.

“Karkat!” Dave shouted. His footsteps grew closer and closer until he was kneeling at Karkat’s side. “Are you okay? What happened? Who is that?”

Karkat swallowed hard. He sat up, slowly letting his glance nuggets wander to Gamzee’s fallen form. He was still breathing. Karkat could see his chest rising and falling, and his teeth were clenched in a scowl. Purple blood was seeping through his armor.

“Shit,” said Dave. “Karkat, don’t watch.”

Karkat threw out his arm, remembering how to speak. “No. Don’t kill him, please, he’s just…” He stared down at Gamzee.

_How did this happen?_
“He’s just fucked up. That’s Gamzee. He was my friend… Just, I don’t know. Do you think we could knock him out and tend to him later?” If there was a later, Karkat reminded himself. “He just needs sopor slime.”

“Karkat,” Dave said quietly. “You looked like he was going to kill you.”

“I know. I… Look, people of his blood color, they’re crazy. He’s usually too high to cause any damage, but I guess now that he’s clean…” Karkat hesitated. “I guess he’s dangerous. So, yeah. He might have killed me. There’s a chance he could go on a murderous rampage. But he’s still my friend, and I don’t want to hurt him, so can we just deal with him later? Please?”

Dave pursed his lips. He made as if to say something, but was interrupted by a loud humming from above. “Shit!” he said. “Down!” He dropped his sword and pushed Karkat to the ground, huddling against him as the Condesce’s ship fired. Karkat thought his auricular sponge clots might explode from the sheer volume of the shot. He clung to Dave until the ground stopped shaking, and afterwards, they both took a few minutes to catch their breath.

“Fine,” Dave said, once his breathing had evened out. “We’ll leave him here, pick him up later. But you owe me. Letting someone who wanted to hurt you go free just doesn’t feel right.”

“Thanks,” Karkat whispered.

“Whatever.” Dave rolled off of Karkat, grabbing his sword. “We should go join up with a team. Help ‘em work a tank, or something.”

Karkat tilted his nugbone back to stare up at the underbelly of the Condesce’s ship. It seemed to stretch as far as he could see, blocking out the sky. At the edges of his vision, he could make out the blue of Earth’s atmosphere, filled with puffy clouds.

And something red.

He squinted at it.

“Hey, Dave?”

“Yeah?” Dave followed his line of sight, lips parting in surprise when he zeroed in on the red object. “Is that…”

“I think it might be.” Karkat flipped his visor down.

— carcinoGeneticist [CG] opened memo on board OPERATION SAVE THE WORLD —

CG: FEFERI IS THAT YOUR SHIP?

AG: Ding ding ding, we have a winner.

AG: The trolls up here didn’t stand a chance against us. ;:::)

CG: ANY PROGRESS ON THE DEFENSES?

AG: We’re working on it. Shockingly enough, Imperial tech is difficult to crack.

CG: I’M REALLY NOT IN THE FUCKING MOOD FOR SARCASM. OUR TROOPS ARE FALLING APART, OUR GUNS DON’T DO SHIT, WE’RE BASICALLY GETTING ANNIHILATED, AND, OH YEAH, DID I MENTION TAVROS IS FUCKING DEAD?
AC: :00< what????????!!!!

CG: GAMZEE FINALLY FLIPPED HIS SHIT.

CG: TAVROS WAS IN THE WAY.

CG: NEED I SAY MORE?

AC: :(<< oh noooooooo

AC: :(<< poor tavros

AC: :(<< im so sorry!

TT: Our troops aren’t the only thing falling apart. There’s a lot of rumbling going on upstairs, it sounds like the base is collapsing. I’m going to start moving out soon so I don’t get trapped. Jade’s sending a team down to help me, this bomb is fucking heavy.

CG: IS IT FINISHED?

TT: Close enough. I can do the finishing touches outside, then it’s go time.

Karkat was forming a response when Dave slammed into him once more. Since they were already on the ground, all he had to do was roll onto Karkat and stay there until the shaking subsided.

“Get off me,” Karkat huffed. “I’m not some delicate fucking maiden, I can protect myself.”

Dave shrugged. “You say that, and yet I still get the funniest feeling that you’re gonna get impaled by shrapnel the second I look away. It’s not like you have a history of getting yourself hurt, kidnapped, emotionally traumatized--”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Let’s find some cover, jeez.” Karkat stood up, dusting himself off. He didn’t wait for Dave to respond before running in the direction of the nearest tank.

Jane was sitting on the front. She waved as he drew closer, and though the gesture was playful, she looked tense beyond belief. She started talking before he was even close enough to hear.

“--being killed, and if we wait any longer--”

“Hey, slow down!” he said quickly. “What’s going on?”

“Look around,” Jane said sadly.

Karkat flipped up his visor and absorbed the scene around him.

Tanks and soldiers were scattered around the field, firing in vain up at the Condesce’s ship, but there seemed to be fewer than there had been at the start of the battle. Feferi’s ship was growing closer, but not fast enough. The Condesce was still ripping them apart. The ground was scored with smoking craters from her guns. Nearly half the base had crumbled, and Karkat’s digestion sack twisted when he saw the bodies littering the ground.

“We’re going to die out here,” said Jane.

“Jesus,” said Dave, appearing behind Karkat. “Way to be optimistic, Jane.”

“It’s true,” she said miserably. “Do you really believe we have a chance at winning?”
“Yes,” Karkat said firmly. In all honesty, he wasn’t sure if he was telling the truth, but if they gave up, then they really wouldn’t have a chance. He went back to his memo.

CG: LOOKS LIKE MORALE IS FADING TOO.

CG: NOW WOULD BE A REALLY, *REALLY* GOOD TIME TO SPEED UP.

CA: wwhat the fuck do you think wwere kar doin it aint exactly a picnic up here

CA: wwere understaffed and underprepared

CA: wwere doin pretty good all things considered but wwe need more power

TA: not two mention more time

CG: JKBCIEHNCKNCJERSJCESCK

CG: FUCKING HELL. FINE. YOU WANT MORE POWER? YOU’LL GET MORE POWER. BEAM ME AND DAVE UP THERE.

TG: :0

TG: ngl we do need the help but are u sure

CG: WE DON’T HAVE TIME FOR SURE. BEAM ME THE FUCK UP.

Karkat grabbed Dave’s shoulder. “We’re going up. Are you ready?”

“Wait, what?” said Dave, alarmed. “It’s too dangerous! I can’t let you--”

“That’s why we’re both going. Too late to argue.” Dave’s skin was beginning to shimmer with a faint light. He patted frantically at it, but it only grew brighter, Karkat’s skin mirroring the glow.

“Wish us luck,” Karkat said to Jane.

Then, with a pop, they were somewhere else entirely.

Karkat stumbled into Dave. The floor beneath them was vibrating; it must have been the tremble of the engine as they shot through the sky. They were on the ship. Every detail around them was precise, luxurious in that typical highblood fashion; the walls were white with metallic accents, and the teleportation pads beneath Karkat’s feet glowed with a faint pink light. At the corner of the room was a booth. Its door slammed open, and Karkat suddenly found himself enveloped in the arms of a familiar catlike troll.

“Karkat!” Nepeta squealed. “Oh, thank goodness it worked!”

Karkat gently pushed her away, his glance nuggets roving across the room. “This is… fancier than I expected.”

Nepeta snorted. “I know, right? There was never anything like this in our sector of the ship. That’s highblood privilege for you, I guess.” She pouted for a second before straightening up. “But there’s no time for exploring! We’ve secured the cockpit and the starboard gun, but there are a couple highbloods still trying to break in. We need to finish them off.”

“Right.” Karkat nudged Dave. “Care to join us, earthling?”
Dave was still staring at the room around them with stars in his eyes.

“I’m on an alien ship,” he said.

Karkat rolled his glance nuggets. “And I thought John was going to be the one fangirling. Come on, we’ve got a planet to save.”

“Fuck! Sorry.” Dave shook himself, following Karkat and Nepeta out of the room. They crept through the hall, Nepeta holding a finger to her lips. Once she had confirmed that there was no one around, they snuck down the hall and into another room, this one much larger. At its center was a dais. A troll’s body hung suspended above the ground, pink cords like veins wrapping around every limb and poking from the orifices.

“Oh, god,” Dave whispered. “That is never going to be not disgusting.”

“Trust me, you’re not the only one who feels that way,” Karkat said, averting his glance nuggets. Seeing the helmsman of a pod had been one thing. But this was a fully-grown troll on a fully-sized ship, and it was only more grotesque. Yellow blood spattered the cords holding the pilot in place, and Karkat knew that if you took out the gear, all you would find would be the rotting skull of a troll more dead than alive.

Sitting a ways away from the helmsman was Vriska. She had her hands to her temples, her glance nuggets squeezed shut tight with concentration. She must have been piloting through the helmsman. While Karkat had about as much affection for her as he had for a swamp monster, he had to admit, her psychic powers were sort of badass.

“I can feel you looking at me,” she snapped. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s rude to stare?”

Karkat quickly looked away. Dave shot him an amused look.

“This way,” said Nepeta. “John and Roxy are holding down the guns with Eridan and Delilah. Sollux, uh… didn’t want to be nearby.” She glanced at the helmsman, wincing a little bit. “He’s waiting for us, too, though. With Feferi.”

“What are you waiting for, then? Show us the way,” said Karkat. Nepeta nodded, setting a brisk pace across the room. A section of the wall slid away at her approach, forming a door wide enough for them all to walk through. A short hall bridged the gap between the pilot’s room and their destination. They passed through it, and another door slid automatically open, revealing Eridan, who sat at a complicated-looking set of controls. Delilah was hovering over his shoulder, giving him instructions. At the sight of Karkat, her face lit up, but she gave him no more than a smile before she returned her attention to Eridan.

“Karkat,” said Eridan, not looking up. “Good to see you. Kind of in the middle of a lesson here, sorry. Learnin’ how to shoot and stuff. Would you mind givin’ Sol a talk? He’s sorta havin’ a mental breakdown.”

Sollux sat huddled at the far end of the room. Behind him was a door like the one Karkat had come through, and through a translucent pane, he could see a pair of furious-looking indigo-bloods. John and Roxy had their guns raised threateningly, daring the trolls to come any closer. Sollux barely seemed to notice the tension. He just stared down at his palmhusk as Feferi patted his back, murmuring words of encouragement.

“Just try to stay focused, Sollux, you can do it.”

“I can’t,” he said. “It’th too much. You shouldn’t have truthed me with thith.”
Karkat marched over to them, crossing his arms over his chest. “And what exactly is going on here?”

“I can’t hack the defense,” Sollux said miserably. “They’re too well protected. I’m sorry, Karkat, but it’s impossible.”

Something slammed into the wall behind Sollux. Karkat jumped a foot, but Sollux barely reacted. “They’re still trying to get in. We’re pretty secure in here, but in the grand scheme of things, they’re going to win. The Condesce is going to kill everyone on the planet this Thursday.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Karkat snapped. “You’re the smartest troll I’ve ever met, Sollux, I know you can do this.”

“Hey,” Dave said, laying a hand on Karkat’s shoulder. “Give him some air.” He squatted down in front of Sollux. “Look, dude, are you sure you’ve given it everything you’ve got?”

“Yeah. There’s literally no way for me to get into the defense, I’ve tried everything.”

“Okay, then.” Dave stood up. “We’ll have to find another way.”

Karkat looked at him in disbelief. “You’re just going to let him give up?”

“It’s not giving up. Everyone has their limits,” Dave said quietly. “He’s a genius, but he’s not a miracle worker, Karkat. We’re just a bunch of kids. We’ve gotten lucky so far, but sometimes, there are things stronger than you are. Now. Does anyone have any ideas on what else we could do?”

“We could just attack with what we’ve got,” Roxy suggested. “Maybe it’ll do some damage. Imperial guns against imperial defenses; they should cancel out, right?”

“No,” said Sollux. “This ship is a lot weaker than the Condesce’s. We might be able to land a hit, but the death ship will take out the ship if we tried a direct attack. The probability will anyway.”

“Okay, I recognize that we can’t do much damage while she’s got her defenses up, but that’s just pessimistic,” said Dave. “I think we’ll be able to withstand a bit of a fight.”

“But how are we going to fight her, exactly?” Sollux said, frustrated. “Anyone got any brilliant idea?”

The initial plan was to lower the Condesce’s defenses, then launch their bomb with Sollux’s psionics. It was made from a combination of human and Alternian tech. The Condesce might have been immune to each type on its own, but combined, Karkat hoped they could do some extra damage. Of course, this plan hinged on their ability to lower the Condesce’s defenses. If they couldn’t, they would have to chart out an entirely new strategy, which they didn’t have time to do.

“Sollux,” Karkat said. “How much psychic energy would it take on your part to force the bomb directly through her shields?”

“It’d be impossible,” said Sollux. “I’m not that strong.”

Karkat raked a frustrated hand through his hair and began to pace the length of the room. “Okay. Fuck. Ideas, anyone? Come on, I can’t be the only one thinking here!”

“Wait,” Dave said suddenly. “Sollux isn’t the only psionic we have.”

Karkat raised an eyebrow. “Have you been hiding another one up your ass this whole time?”

Dave breathed a puff of laughter, and Karkat could tell he was rolling his glance nuggets behind his
Sunglasses. “No, stupid. The helmsman, the one flying this ship, the one Vriska can control with her mind. Couldn’t we use his power, too?”

“That’s a thought!” Nepeta said excitedly, looking at Sollux for any sign of agreement. “Would your combined psychic energy be enough to break the shields?” she asked.

Sollux drummed his fingers on the floor, his claws making a sharp clacking noise. “Maybe. But asking the helmsman to fly this ship while propelling a bomb at the same time? It’s a lot, even with me helping. If it compromises his ability to fly…”

“What if it wasn’t just the bomb trying to break through the shields?” Dave said suddenly. “If there was something bigger assaulting them, would that make them easier to break, or harder?”

Sollux looked confused. “It depends, I guess. What are you thinking?”

“What if we played a little game of interstellar bumper cars?”

It took a moment for the meaning of Dave’s words to sink in.

“You want to ram them?” Karkat said, shaking his head in disbelief. “We’d be killed.”

“But would it work?” asked Feferi, her nose crinkling.

Sollux looked thoughtful. “Actually… the additional pressure on the barrier might be helpful. And if we could teleport the bomb up here, that would mean we wouldn’t have to expend so much energy launching it from the ground… We could fly straight up to the Condeth and detonate it in her fathe.”

“Well, what are we waiting for then?” Feferi said excitedly. “Let’s do it!”

“Wait,” he said. “It’s super dangerous. The bomb’s gonna explode bathically on top of us. There’s no telling whether or not we’ll make it out alive. We could try to teleport down before the explosion, but…”

“The risk doesn’t matter,” Roxy said firmly. “This is my fuckin’ planet, and I’m gonna do whatever it takes to save it. There are millions of people down there. Our lives don’t matter in the grand scheme of things. The only thing about us that matters is what we do right here, right now.”

“Seconded!” said John. “This is our best shot at winning the war.”

Karkat found himself looking to Dave.

“Fine by me,” Dave said quietly.

“Okay then,” said Sollux, raising his eyebrows. “I guess we have a plan? Thomebody grab Eridan and fill him in. I’m gonna go tell Vrithka what’s going on.” He set his palmhusk aside and strode across the room, wincing as he approached the door that led to the pilot’s room. After taking a moment to brace himself, he stepped through.

“This is crazy,” Dave murmured. “I can’t believe we’re actually doing this. This could go wrong so fucking easily, and we’d die without ever making a difference.”

Karkat frowned. “I think we’ve already made a difference, Dave. This just… decides how big that difference is. We might die, but if we do, it won’t have been for nothing.”

Dave smiled softly. “I’m glad you think so.”
Karkat prodded his cheek disapprovingly. “I don’t just think so, I know so. What, do you not realize what we’ve been doing? We’ve turned this into an actual fight. Without us, it would just have been a massacre. Your planet has a chance to survive thanks to you. Without you…” He coughed. “I might never have realized that, uh… having red blood isn’t so bad. So, even if you can’t believe you’re saving the world, you made a difference to me.”

Dave just stared at him for a minute, lost for words.

Then Karkat’s helmet beeped, and the moment was shattered.

GC: WH4TS GO1NG ON UP TH3R3???

GC: 1 H4V3NT H4V3RD K4RK4T B1TCH1NG FOR 4T L34FT H4LF 4N HOUR, SOM3TH1NG MUST B3 WRONG

CG: OH SHUT UP. WE’RE MAKING A NEW PLAN.

GC: OH JOY

GC: 1S 1T GO1NG TO G3T US 4LL K1LL3D

CG: POSSIBLY, BUT WE’VE GOT TO TRY IT. IS THE BOMB READY? WE NEED TO TELEPORT IT UP HERE.

TT: It’s ready when you are.

TT: Feel free to take any weapons you want. We’ve got quite a few bombs, actually, they just haven’t been worked over like the main one. If you don’t mind a little human tech, you can take them all.

CG: THANKS. GIVE US A SECOND, WE’LL BEAM THEM UP.

TT: Oh, and one more thing.

TT: Give Delilah my best. I’d hate for you all to die up there without getting to say goodbye.

CG: I WILL.

Karkat slowly pushed up his visor. He felt strangely cut off from Earth’s surface. The atmosphere of the ship was intense; it felt as if the entire world was contained within its walls.

And, in a way, it was.

The highbloods outside the door slammed into it once more, and Roxy jabbed her gun at them. “Stop it!”

“Why don’t you just kill them?” Dave said curiously.

Roxy made a face. “I’d have to let them in to do that, and I don’t wanna have a big fight right in front of the controls, y’know? What if they broke through to the pilot’s room? We’d be done for.”

“Thpeaking of pilotht,” said Sollux. He stood in the doorway that led to the helmsman. “Vrithka thaid the could do it. The can make him launch the bomb. All we have to do ith get it up here, then… We’re good to go.”

“I’ll get to the teleporters,” Nepeta murmured. She slipped past Sollux. As she left, the mood sank.
This was really happening.

Karkat took the sudden quiet as an opportunity. He crept over to Eridan and Delilah, who were still talking over the details of the console before them.

“Hey,” he said to Delilah. “Dirk said to give you his best. He wanted to say goodbye, or whatever. In case we didn’t make it.” He felt awkward trying to relay such a meaningful message. Afterwards, it felt like he should have something of his own to say, but he had nothing.

Eridan pushed out of his seat and fled to the other end of the room.

Delilah spared him the briefest of looks before she smiled, her glance nuggets crinkling into narrow slits. It was a smile Karkat should have been familiar with, should have loved, but it was no more familiar than a stranger’s. How could he say goodbye to someone he’d just met?

“He’s a good kid, Dirk,” said Delilah, looking back to Karkat. “I’ll miss him.” She reached out and ruffled Karkat’s hair. He didn’t move away. “Not as much as I’ll miss you, though.”

Karkat wished he could slink away and avoid this situation, but he owed it to her to try. Deep down, he wanted to try. He wanted to know his mother a little more before he lost her.

“How do you know how to work all this stuff?” he asked, pointing to the console.

Delilah looked down at it, running a hand along the curved metal. “The Sufferer had a ship. It was much smaller than this one, of course, but it did have some weapons. He taught me everything he thought I might need someday. I thought it was fascinating, of course, but I never thought I’d actually use it… I guess I was wrong. I’m glad I paid attention.”

“Guys?” Nepeta called from the next room. “I just brought up the weapons… They’re ready when you are.”

Karkat took a deep breath.

“So. We’re actually doing this.”

“Yep,” said Dave. He wrapped one arm around Karkat’s waist, but kept his glance nuggets fixed to the floor. “We should probably get into a group.”

“Agreed. This isn’t something to be done alone,” said Delilah. She raised her voice: “Gather round, everyone!”

“You gather round!” Vriska shouted. “I’m busy. Come to me if you want me so bad.”

Delilah grinned. “Feisty, that one.” But she beckoned for Karkat and Dave to follow as she made for the pilot’s room.

Inside, Sollux and Vriska were seated before the helmsman. Vriska had her glance nuggets squeezed tight with concentration. Sollux wore a similar expression, but he was probably just avoiding looking at his fellow psionic.

Something that sounded like a gunshot came from the room Karkat had just left. John and Roxy trailed inside a moment later. “The highbloods weren’t such good fighters after all,” John said, his voice oddly hollow. “They won’t bother us.”

Nepeta peered through the door on the other end of the room. “I’m manning the teleporters. As soon
as Sollux has the bomb, I’ll try to beam you all down, then follow with Vriska and Sollux. Does anyone want to say a few words before we get started?”

Karkat eyed Dave apprehensively. There were more than a few words he’d like to say, but he couldn’t say them in front of the others.

But then again, this might be his only chance.

“I want to commend you all for extraordinary bravery,” Delilah said quietly. “I’ve never met a group of kids with more heart. Your planet should be proud of you. Nepeta, take care of your friends before me, all right? I want as many of you to make it out safely as you possibly can.”


Karkat took a deep breath. He could feel the tension building in his pump biscuit; if he didn’t let it out, he didn’t know what would happen. “Be right back,” he said, taking Dave’s hand and pulling him from the room.

Once they were out of earshot, Karkat turned Dave to face him, steeling his nerves.

“There’s something I want to say to you,” he said. Despite his efforts, his voice still shook.

*It’s now or never.*

Karkat mustered all the courage he had, and slipped Dave’s sunglasses off. Without them, he looked so much more vulnerable. Karkat was instantly reminded of the first time they’d looked each other face to face. Dave had looked just like this, glance nuggets wide and scarlet and searching, as if he knew he was on the brink of death. Fuck. Karkat might’ve killed him. He traced his fingers across Dave’s cheek, following the lines where he had once slashed his claws across it.

“Karkat?” Dave questioned. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Karkat whispered. “It’s just…”

It was just that they were so alike. Just a pair of kids following the same path across the stars, the red strands of fate binding them together reflected in their glance nuggets. They had been born together on that beautiful planet known as Earth, and though time had torn them apart, there they were, back together again. Dave was running from something, Karkat could tell. There was fear tangled up inside him, pulling at him like the strings of a puppet. Karkat knew the feeling. He was running, too. But within him, there was less fear and more anger, jagged and sharp as broken glass. He and Dave were both tearing across the universe, searching for a place to hide, but instead of a haven, Karkat had found a home.

“Karkat?” asked Dave, quieter this time. His hand came to rest on Karkat’s cheek, stroking a thumb across the gray skin. “What’s up?”

This was the day they died.

There was nowhere left to run.

“I like you!” Karkat blurted. “I know it’s sort of shitty to tell you like this, because if we die, the last memory you’ll have of me is, ‘woah, awkward’ but at the same time, I can’t really charge into battle without telling you because I feel like it’s sort of a big deal, even if I’m half alien to you and it’s weird and gross and you don’t–”
Dave kissed him.

Karkat made a muffled noise of surprise, then relaxed into the kiss, threading his fingers through Dave’s hair. Dave’s lips were soft on his, full of that oh-so-human tenderness. Karkat had to remind himself to keep his teeth in check. They were much sharper than Dave’s, and if he wasn’t careful, he could-- oh, fuck, Dave was pulling away.

“Sorry,” Dave said, sounding slightly dazed. “You sounded like you were getting a little overwhelmed there.”

“Sorry?” Karkat said in disbelief. “You’re so-- motherfucker, get back here.” He pulled Dave in again, pressing their lips together. “Why the fuck,” he growled, “Didn’t you say something sooner? We could’ve been doing this for ages!”

“I think you said it yourself,” Dave said dryly. “I’m half alien to you, so you might’ve thought--” Karkat cut him off with another kiss, stealing the words directly from his mouth.

“Just shut up.”

Wrapped in Dave’s arms, Karkat felt blissfully removed from reality. The war was a distant thing, the ship around them a mere backdrop for a far more important scene. Battles, quadrants, planets; none of it mattered. The only thing that mattered was Dave. Karkat fit against him like a puzzle piece, their lips locked perfectly together, melting away the stress and confusion of existence.

They were together, and that was all Karkat needed.

Someone coughed loudly from the doorway. Karkat would’ve been quite content to ignore it, but Dave startled and pulled away. His blush almost made it worth it.

“Whenever you two decide to come up for air, we’ve got a war to fight,” Eridan grumbled.

Karkat flipped him off, pressing a kiss to Dave’s jaw. “You’re just jealous.”

“We should probably go,” Dave murmured. Karkat made a noise of dissatisfaction, but he allowed Dave to move away towards the door, his hand clasped in Karkat’s.

“Finally,” Vriska said loudly as they walked in. “Gog, the tension was killing me.” Nepeta giggled, nodding furiously. Delilah waggled her eyebrows, and Karkat went white with mortification before Eridan interrupted again.

“I’ll man the controls. I’ll be firing this ship’s guns on the Condesce while Sollux shoves the bomb through; we’re hitting her with all we’ve got.”

Instantly, the room went sober. Dave tightened his grip on Karkat’s hand.

“No more waiting, then, I gueth,” said Sollux. “It’th time.”

Karkat buried his face in Dave’s neck.

“Now,” Vriska said quietly.

For a moment, everything was still.

Then the ship shuddered beneath their feet, rocking with the force of its acceleration. The floor thrummed with energy, the engines roared; Karkat could barely feel his fingers, he was clinging to Dave so tightly.
“Teleporters!” Nepeta screamed. “Now! Go, go go!”

They raced out of the pilot’s room towards the teleporters. Nepeta leapt into the booth, flipping switches and hitting buttons until the two transport pads glowed bright pink. “Everyone on!” she ordered. John and Roxy hopped onto the pads, and in a flash of light, they vanished. Karkat started to pull Dave towards them, but he hesitated, looking over his shoulder in the direction of the helmsman.

“There’s no time!” Delilah shouted. “Just go!” The entire room was vibrating, and there was a pressure building in Karkat’s auricular sponge clots, as if they might pop at any moment.

“But Sollux--”

“Go, Karkat!”

Dave yanked him over to the pad by his sleeve. Karkat stumbled into him, and he looked up at Delilah. Her mouth opened and began to form words--

Then, in a surge of heat, the ship was gone. Instead, they were surrounded by a battlefield, green grass beneath their feet and blue skies above.

Karkat looked up.

Their ship collided with that of the Condesce with a rumbling boom. The point of contact instantly burst into flames.

“Did it work?” Karkat whispered.

“I don’t know,” Dave whispered back. “But I think it might have.”

They watched the skies together. Around them, Karkat could hear humans cheering, but he remained silent. It would not do to celebrate too soon.

There was no sign of their companions. No one appeared with a flash, stumbling out of thin air. The space around them was empty.

Karkat watched the flames spread across the ship, the pristine metal rupturing as explosions reverberated through the sky. His pump biscuit sank.

If this was a victory, it was not one to be celebrated.

Chapter End Notes

thus ends 21/22.

the end is nigh, my dears.
Chapter Summary

"I'm waking up at the start of the end of the world
But its feeling just like every other morning before
Now I wonder what my life is going to mean if it's gone
The cars are moving like a half a mile an hour
And I started staring at the passengers who're waving goodbye
Can you tell me what was ever really special about me all this time?"

-Let's See How Far We've Come, Matchbox 20

Chapter Notes

bit of a gore trigger warning on this one, watch out for that

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dave stood by Karkat’s side, watching the sky burn. They were frozen for what felt like hours, but was probably more like minutes. It didn't take long for the screams to start. The ships were coming down, and they were coming down fast.

Dave grabbed onto Karkat and practically carried him away, adrenaline giving him the strength he needed. Karkat could barely move on his own. He kept staring up at the falling ships, undoubtedly thinking exactly the same thing as Dave:

*No one could make it out of there alive.*

But while Karkat faced the bitter shock of his friends’ deaths, Dave could only feel relief that the two of them had survived.

The guilt would set in later on.

He ran and ran until his legs could bear his weight no longer. The fields surrounding the base seemed to stretch on for eternity. His feet slammed into the grass again and again until all his muscles screamed in protest, and then the ground gave way, throwing Dave and Karkat to the ground. A monumental *boom* sounded behind them as the ships collided with the earth. A cloud of dust exploded into the air, filling Dave’s lungs, choking him. He could barely breathe through the ash and adrenaline. It felt as if his chest was going to burst; if his heart and lungs kept straining, they would break right through his skin, leaving him as dead as every friend that had fallen with the ships.

Karkat’s fist pounded against Dave’s back as he wheezed for breath. He ripped his shades off, but it did no good. The dust was impossible to see through. He could barely make out Karkat’s silhouette beside him. The ground had stopped shaking, but Dave’s limbs were still trembling, and he knew that if he tried to stand, he would only fall.
“We need to get out of here,” Karkat coughed.

“No,” Dave managed. “Look for survivors, we--”

“Can’t,” said Karkat. “C’mon. Get somewhere safe.” He sounded exhausted, like every word took herculean effort.

Dave grabbed his hand, and they pulled each other up, leaning against each other for support. Together, they wandered in what Dave hoped was the opposite direction of the base. They would come back later. Now, they just needed to be anywhere but where they were.

***

The survivors were split between elation and depression. Dave could hear people cheering, whooping with delight at the enemies they had conquered.

It was bullshit. The human troops had done nothing but distract the Condesce. It was Karkat’s friends who had made a real difference, but they weren’t able to claim credit for it. No one would listen when Dave tried to tell them who the real heroes were. Humans, they were so selfish. Just because they had been present at the final battle, they thought of themselves as great warriors. Sollux, Vriska, all the true heroes; they would die unrecognized, the martyrs of a lost cause.

Dave hadn’t saved them, and now he couldn’t even bring them the glory they deserved.

He had never been the leader of the group. If there was a leader, it was Karkat, or maybe Rose. But Dave couldn’t stop himself from feeling responsible. He was the one who had been trained since he was born to be a leader. He was the one with the fighting experience, the know-how, the lessons drilled into his brain on how to be a hero, be a hero, be a hero.

And he’d still failed.

In reality, there was nothing he could have done. He knew that. But as he returned to the smoking wreck of Feferi’s ship, Karkat by his side, he couldn’t suppress the twinge of guilt.

They had intended to go inside, to comb the interior for any scrap of hope, but it was impossible. All the entrances were melted shut or covered with rubble. They couldn’t even blow a hole into the wall- they’d used all their explosives in their final strike.

The first thing Jane said when they found her was, “I’m sorry.”

They found Dirk next. He was tending to an injured girl. Her side had been pierced by a gigantic piece of shrapnel, and her shirt was soaked with blood. “You’ve just gotta keep your eyes open, okay?” Dirk was saying. “We did it, we won. Stay with me now, you’ve got it. Stay with me.”

Dave was hit by a sudden wave of déjà vu.

“Go find Terezi,” Dirk said without looking up. “We got separated after the explosion. The dust is probably screwing with her scent-vision, or whatever it is. She’ll need help. I saw Aradia a few minutes ago, too, but I don’t know where she went.”

Dave nodded silently. Karkat kept one arm wrapped firmly around his waist as they walked through the wreckage.

As it turned out, Terezi was fine. She was shell-shocked and covered in dust, but not injured. It was Jade who had come off worse for wear. She was pinned beneath a chunk of concrete with only her upper body sticking out. When Dave showed up, she managed to smile, but her breathing was labored.
“It was the freaking roof,” she explained, wincing a little. “It collapsed right before the ships fell. I didn’t have time to run. The Condesce’s ship hadn’t even hit the ground yet, and I was already crushed like the wicked witch of the freaking east.”

“It was sort of pathetic,” Terezi agreed. Jade glared at her, and she held her hands up in surrender. “Kidding, kidding! I’m just trying to figure out how we’re gonna get you out of there.”

“If we just had Sollux,” Karkat muttered. “He’d lift that shit up in two seconds.”

“Well, we don’t,” Terezi said quietly. “We don’t have any of them, Karkat. Not Sollux, not John, not Vriska. So we need to find another way.”

It was only then that Dave noticed the teal-tinted streaks that had dried beneath her glasses.

They were organizing a group to shift the concrete when they heard the shriek. Dave had barely turned around before he and Karkat were plowed into and enveloped in a pair of arms.

“Karkat!” Kanaya sobbed. “They said you had beamed up, I didn’t know if you had made it out, thank goodness you’re all right—” She drew back and cupped his face tightly in her hands. “Do not ever scare me like that again, you hear?”

“I’m fine,” he said, pulling Kanaya into a hug. “I wouldn’t do that to you, Kanaya, I’m fine. I promise.”

“Oh, Karkat.” She squeezed him tightly, and over his shoulder, her eyes locked onto Dave. She let Karkat go and pounced on Dave, hugging him just as tightly. “And you! You kept him safe, I knew you would!”

“I, um,” said Dave, patting her back awkwardly. “Yeah. You’re welcome?”

Kanaya smiled, her eyes watery. “You have been a good influence on him. I hope you realize that. And I hope you realize your feelings for each other soon, because if you do not, I think I shall explode.”

Karkat coughed loudly. “Yeah! Uh. We, uh, took care of that. No worries,” he said, blushing furiously. Dave smiled and pecked him on the cheek.

“How touching,” said Rose, appearing behind Kanaya. She shot them an amused look, wrapping her arms around Kanaya’s waist from behind. Karkat raised his eyebrows.

“It looks like we’re not the only ones sorting out feelings.”

It was Kanaya’s turn to blush. “I, ah, never said you were.”

“Quit flirting and get me out of here!” Jade squawked.

Karkat looked troubled for a second, then his eyes lit up. “Shit! I know what to do. Kanaya, can you go find Equius?”

She sighed. “Why must I be the one to locate him?”

“Because you love me,” Karkat said innocently. “And you want to spare me the trauma of getting within smelling distance of him.”

“If I bring him here, we will all be within smelling distance,” Kanaya pointed out. Karkat looked at her pleadingly, and she finally sighed. “Fine. I will go and find the means to rescue Jade.”
“Have fun with that,” Karkat said brightly.

“And hurry up,” Jade said, wincing with pain.

Dave felt a little guilty that he couldn’t do more to help her, but Karkat pressed a kiss to his jaw, effectively distracting him. There were a lot of things he felt guilty about, but he preferred not to deal with any of them, so instead, he let Karkat wash it all away.

***

The floor beneath Dave’s feet was shaking. He could hear the ship’s engines growing louder and louder, the roar of a swiftly-approaching death by collision. Dave shoved Karkat onto the teleporter, and he vanished into thin air, but as Dave stepped forward, something latched onto his back and held him fast.

“You don’t deserve an escape,” Nepeta snarled.

Dave whirled around. Nepeta’s eyes were narrowed with fury, and the pupils were all wrong; vertical slashes of black instead of circles. She hissed, and Dave could see a pair of sharp fangs protruding from her mouth. He stumbled back, but someone else caught him and pushed him away from the teleporter.

“You die with us,” Eridan growled.

Feferi ripped Dave’s sunglasses off and snapped them, tossing the broken pieces to the side. ”You can’t hide,” she said. “You know you’re the reason we failed.”

“You’re the reason we died,” said John.

“You should’ve let us go first,” said Roxy.

Their hands reached for Dave’s head, for his throat, squeezing and tugging and pulling him closer to the center of the room where the helmsman hung. He was suspended from the ceiling, wires snaking in and out of his skin in a deadly tapestry.

“Didn’t thave uth,” he wheezed.

Vriska tore off his goggles, a strip of flesh ripping free along with them. Yellow blood ran in putrid streams from his vacant eye sockets. Dave squeezed his own eyes shut, but the image wouldn’t go away. He retched into his hand. One of the trolls shoved him forward, forcing his hands onto Sollux’s decaying face. His fingers sunk into the rotting flesh, soaking with blood, but John held them so Dave couldn’t move away.

”Say you’re sorry,” he demanded. “Say it!” The others joined him, repeating the phrase over and over, “Say you’re sorry, say you’re sorry.”

”I’m sorry,” Dave whispered. They didn’t seem to hear. They just kept chanting, their voices swelling louder and louder. John forced Dave’s fingers harder into Sollux’s jaw, so he could feel every movement as the yellow-blood spoke, “Say you’re sorry.”

”I’m sorry,” Dave choked. “I’m so fucking sorry, please stop, oh my God--”

Sollux reached around the back of his head and tore out a chunk of wiring. The sound it produced made Dave gag, but Sollux kept clawing at the wires, pulling out every veinlike thread holding him in place. His body jerked as he tore the final strand, and he crumpled to the ground. Dave couldn’t
back away fast enough. He covered his eyes, wishing he could burn the memory away, purge his mind of the sights, the sounds, of every sensation that assaulted him from all sides.

He stumbled right into someone’s arms.

"You don’t deserve my son,” Delilah hissed in his hear.

Her fingers sunk knuckle-deep into his eyes, and he cried out in pain as the others laughed, their smiles growing wider and wider as they jeered, delighting in his agony--

“Dave, wake up, god damn it, wake up! Dave!”

Dave startled awake with a cry. He frantically touched his fingers to his eyelids, then rubbed his hands together, the dry feeling of his skin not computing. The blood, the blood--

“Dave,” Karkat repeated, softer this time. “It was just a dream. You’re okay.” He was lying by Dave’s side, propped up by his elbows.

Dave whimpered slightly. He didn’t even have the strength to protest as Karkat pulled him in close. They laid facing each other, Karkat holding both of Dave’s hands between them.

“It’s okay,” he said soothingly. “None of that shit was real. I’ve got you.”

“I’m sorry,” Dave whispered. His voice broke, but he didn’t care. There was no hiding this. His face was soaked with tears, and judging by the scratchy feeling in his throat, he’d been screaming in his sleep. Trying to hide the way his breathing shook would do him no good.

“You’re sorry? What the fuck for? Don’t apologize, asshole!” Karkat said. Dave couldn’t help but flinch at the words. At once, Karkat’s eyes widened with regret, and he squeezed Dave closer. “Shit, sorry. Whatever you saw wasn’t real, okay? You don’t have to apologize for anything.”

“I do,” Dave said. His stomach was filled with a frothing mass of guilt, mixed with leftover terror and more than a little embarrassment. Karkat shouldn’t have had to deal with this. Dave shouldn’t have agreed to spend the night with him. Everything had been going so well, too-- it felt like they grew closer every day, exploring new aspects of the fascinating relationship they had each come to cherish. Dave was pretty sure he was in love.

But Karkat would have to see the truth eventually. He’d see what a fuckup Dave was, and then where would they be?

“I swear, you don’t.” Karkat shifted so he could kiss Dave’s forehead. “Just think about happy shit. Remember when you were giving us language lessons and I couldn’t pronounce ‘sponge?’”

Dave smiled weakly. “You still can’t.”

“See, there we go. Remember when Terezi found out that there’s cotton candy on Earth?”

Dave nodded, still smiling. It was mostly for Karkat’s benefit. Karkat seemed satisfied by this, and he took Dave’s hands once more, gently running the pad of his thumb over them. “Let’s go back to sleep. We can talk tomorrow, okay?”

“Kay,” Dave mumbled.

They wouldn’t be talking tomorrow. Not if Dave had a say in it. He didn’t want to re-live the dreams, and he especially didn’t want Karkat to know how bad they were. Karkat didn’t know what
he had gotten himself into by getting close to Dave.

Dave never wanted him to realize.

***

The months following the end of the world went by in a blur. By day, Dave tracked global events, watching society gradually rebuild itself. By night, he tried to forget why it was all necessary.

After being confronted with the existence of aliens, a full-scale invasion, and the deaths of millions, no one knew how to react when it all stopped. And stopped by a group of teenagers, no less. It seemed impossible that life could return to normal, now that humanity knew what lay beyond its solar system. How could anyone focus on rebuilding the economy when there were entire galaxies just waiting to be explored? How could anyone forget what had happened when so many had died? The universe suddenly seemed a much more threatening place.

But, with time, things became more comprehensible, more easy to accept, and recovery became something feasible. It took months, yes, almost a year, but the world slowly began to piece itself back together. Dave was almost surprised at how quickly the process began.

“Such is the nature of humanity,” said Kanaya, sighing at the TV screen. Dave didn’t think he’d ever get used to the Alternian accent the trolls all spoke with. It cut syllables into odd sections, accentuating consonants and vowels in a way that was completely unique. Combined with Kanaya’s Shakespearean vocabulary, most of which she had picked up from Rose, hearing her speak was quite an experience. It was so quintessentially alien.

Rose leaned over to give Kanaya a reassuring kiss on the cheek, but the image plastered across the TV screen remained, glaring and impossible to ignore. It was a picture of Dave and Karkat, taken directly from the former’s Twitter account. As usual, the news was running frequent calls for information. Ever since the internet legend known as Dave Strider had gathered forces to save the planet, then subsequently dropped off the grid, the world had been clamoring for news of his whereabouts.

“Shut that shit off,” Karkat yelled from the next room. “Haven’t they figured out by now that we aren’t giving them anything?”

“Apparently not,” Dave called back. “Should I call in and tell them I’m hiding in Antarctica? That’d get them off our backs a while.”

Dave didn’t trust the media, much less the government that so often spoke through it. They claimed to want to ask Dave questions. Dave knew what that meant. They’d interrogate him, wanting to know everything about Alternia and those trolls Dave had somehow befriended. He had seen enough movies to know how that ended. They would come after Karkat, and they wouldn’t stop with any mere “questions,” no. They’d want DNA, they’d want to experiment; they’d ask for all kinds of things Dave would never allow.

He had only become the face of the Resistance due to his internet presence. Since they already knew his name, the public had attached all sorts of deeds to it. He was the hero who had saved them! He had blown up the alien ship and brought hope to the earth!

It was all bullshit. Dave was no hero, and he would never be the sort of figurehead everyone wanted to be. Instead, he would hide out in the bunker he and his friends had discovered, protecting them in the only way he knew how: by keeping them invisible.
Karkat came into the room and sat down on the couch next to him. “Hey,” he said, his voice unusually soft. “Stop it, fuckhead. Don’t let it get you all worked up.”

“I’m not,” said Dave, feigning innocence as best he could. Karkat raised an eyebrow.

“Sure you aren’t. We don’t need to have this discussion again, do we?”

“No. No, we don’t, it’s fine.” Dave already knew what Karkat would say. He would say it wasn’t Dave’s fault, that they couldn’t have done anything to save their friends, that Dave had done the best he could. That Dave had never been the leader, anyway, so he had no reason to feel so guilty. It hadn’t been his responsibility to protect everyone.

But every time Dave thought about the eight stones sitting outside, all that logic disappeared.

There were no bodies in the graves. They were purely symbolic; a representation of the lives that had been lost. Dave could still feel the lump in his throat from when he had written John’s name across the first, carving the letters carefully in with a kitchen knife. John deserved so much better. Fuck, they all did. They deserved memorials and eulogies and proper goddamn recognition, but all Dave could give was a few choked words and a pile of cold stone outside the bunker.

“Right, so we absolutely need to have it again.” Karkat scooted closer so he was half-sitting on Dave. “Where should I start? The fact that you didn’t do anything wrong, or the fact that you did everything right?”

“Karkat,” Dave said wearily. “I don’t--”

“Guys!” Karkat shouted. “Dave’s being an idiot again, come correct him with me!”

“Again?” Terezi yelled from the next room. “Hasn’t he reached peak stupidity yet?”

“Apparently not!”

Dave sighed as Jade skipped into the room, dropping onto the couch beside Karkat. “Hey, Dave. Is it pep talk time?” Terezi followed close after her, launching herself onto the back of the couch and licking a stripe up Dave’s cheek. He made a disgusted face and shoved her away, but there was no malice in the gesture; he was long since used to her less conventional methods of greeting.

“Do we need to have a group therapy session every time Dave makes the slightest self-deprecating comment?” asked Dirk, appearing in the doorway. “At this rate, we’ll be trapped in an endless group hug for the rest of our lives.”

“Exactly!” Dave said fervently. “Finally, someone understands. Everybody go pay attention to Dirk instead of me, that’d be great.”

“No way!” Jane tapped him over the head with a long wooden spoon, and he winced.

“Okay, the kitchen is on the other end of the goddamn bunker, and yet, you got here in, like, point five seconds. Do you guys just lay around waiting for this to happen? Is there, like, a bat signal that goes off every time I think, ‘hey, it really sucks ass that our friends died--’”

“Yeah, there is, actually. It’s that stupid sad face you make,” said Karkat, poking Dave in the cheek. “It tells me everything. You’re an open book.”

“Right.” Dave sighed. “So, there’s no chance of you guys giving me a little personal space.”
“Since when have you liked personal space?” Terezi smirked. “You and Karkat are always crawling all over each other--”

Karkat swatted at her, then scooted into Dave’s lap and grabbed onto his jaw. “Listen up, bulgefuck. I’ve said this fifty thousand fucking times, but you never listen to me, and I don’t know why. I think about it a lot. It’s sort of frustrating, you know? I just don’t get why it’s so hard for you to understand that you’re blameless here.”

“I’m not blameless,” Dave said. Karkat couldn’t convince him that he hadn’t done anything wrong, because he knew for a fact that he had. It was a feeling deep within him, too strong to be doubted. He didn’t deserve forgiveness.

“Dave, you--”

“I’m not, okay?” Dave snapped. Repeating the same reassurances over and over would do him no good. Karkat could try all he wanted, he could drag all Dave’s friends into it, but it wouldn’t make a difference.

“What makes you so sure?” Karkat demanded.

Dave’s eyes narrowed. Karkat wanted to know? Fine.

“Look, man, you don’t have to sugarcoat it. I know I fucked up. Telling me I didn’t gonna do a damn thing. I was getting ready for a war like this since the day I was fucking born, but I guess all that training was useless, ‘cause in the end, I just got everyone killed.” He laughed mirthlessly. “We could’ve made a better plan. I could’ve made them get on the teleporter before me. But I let them all down, right? I was stupid and selfish and now they’re fucking dead. I was supposed to be the one to save them, and I failed. I’ve been shitting myself over just the idea of telling you this, but you asked, so I fucking answered. You don’t need to lie anymore. Just tell me what a piece of shit I am, I promise it’s nothing I haven’t told myself already.”

The look Karkat gave him was downright wounded.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he whispered. “Damn it, Dave. Does this have something to with your shitbag of a lusu-- brother?”

Dave didn’t answer.

Karkat sighed. “I knew there was a reason you didn’t talk about that shit. Damn it, I didn’t know you really felt that bad. I thought it was the trauma, maybe, or… Fuck, I don’t know. Look, don’t ever be scared to tell me things, okay? Everything you just said is wrong. You’re not a bad person, you’re a…” His eyes widened, and something seemed to click.

“Oh,” he said. “I think I get it now.”

He leaned in and kissed Dave firmly before pulling back. “Dave,” he said slowly. ”You never needed to be a hero.”

Dave blinked.

“What?”

“You never needed to be a hero,” Karkat repeated. “You didn’t need to be perfect.”

“Karkat,” Dave said quietly. “It’s okay, man, I don’t--”
“No, you listen to me,” Karkat interrupted. “You’re a good person, and that’s the best anyone can do. There weren’t any standards you failed to meet. You went above and fucking beyond what any normal person gets to accomplish in their lifetime, and you made a real difference in the best way possible. And it was all because you took the fucking initiative.” He jabbed a finger into Dave’s chest to punctuate the sentence. Dave tried once more to speak, but Karkat cut him off. “No. You made the decision to get out there and fight. No one told you to. No one was asking anything of you. You just went out and did something, and that’s what makes you so incredible. You’re not superhuman. You’re just a normal person, but at the same time…” He waved his hands around, wildly searching for the right word. “Fuck it, Dave, you’re one of a kind.”

Dave was suddenly very, very glad he was wearing sunglasses.

“C’mere, asshole,” Karkat said gently. He wrapped his arms around Dave’s waist and rested his head on his shoulder, and for once, the others offered no ridicule.

“Aww,” Jade squealed. “You guys!” When Dave responded only with a raised middle finger, she took the opportunity to move across the couch and envelop both Dave and Karkat in her arms. “You two are so sweet!”

“I take offense to that,” Dave mumbled.

“Everybody make Dave uncomfortable!” Terezi cheered. “Group hug!” She reached over to noogie Karkat and Dave in turn, then squeezed them as tightly as she could. Dave ended up wheezing for breath, pawing weakly at the ever-growing pile of humans and trolls clinging to him.

A few months ago, this much physical contact would have given him an instant panic attack. Now, it wasn’t so bad. It almost made him feel better. The warm embrace of his friends pushed the stress to the edges of his mind, filling it instead with comfort.

“Everybody here loves you,” Karkat murmured in his ear. “When you get done blaming yourself, we’ll all be here, okay?”

“Okay,” Dave whispered back.

Karkat made a noise of surprise. “You’re not arguing.”

“Guess not.”

Karkat smiled tentatively. “Good. That’s… good.”

It had never truly occurred to Dave that Karkat might stay. He had imagined it countless times; one day, he’d blurt out all his wrongdoings, and Karkat would be disgusted. He would finally accept that Dave was to blame for his friends’ deaths.

But this…

Through all the nightmares, fears, and doubts, Karkat wasn’t offering anything more than sweet reassurance. Dave hadn’t done anything to deserve it, but maybe he didn’t need to.

Maybe that was the point of love.

There was still much to be done. Dave knew he was far from healthy, and there were still many topics he wouldn’t open up about to anyone. It would take time. It would take time, effort, and exactly the kind of care Karkat was offering him. As long as Karkat didn’t push him, Dave thought that maybe someday, he could tell him everything.
The world hadn’t ended when the Alternian fleet arrived. It had fought a bloody war for its freedom, and in the end, things had turned out all right. Dave had led the battle for his planet. Now, it was time to face a more difficult challenge: he would have to fight for himself.

But he wouldn’t be fighting alone.

Karkat held him softly, his fingers tracing patterns into Dave’s back. “You know I love you, right?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” said Dave. “Yeah, I do.” He gave Karkat a small smile, and for a moment, he forgot all about the troubles he had faced, and those that were sure to come.

“I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

and there we have it. the ending. honestly, i don't know what to say. i can't believe it went by so quickly, and i can't believe how many people ended up reading this?? um wow?? i think some shoutouts are in order.

firstly, a huge shoutout to amazing wonderful beta, corwin, for being amazing and wonderful!! thank you so much dude!!

secondly, to Sol1t41r3, VanillaCorpse, An Errant Tumbleweed, contour, EmeraldsAndAmethyst, hootpoop12, Otaku_Eloise, apocalypticTaco, and anyone else who consistently left comments! hell, anyone who left comments at all. y'all are the unsung heroes of motivation. i love u.

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fourthly (is that a word??), to Weevilo707 and their amazing work don't forget the sun for partially inspiring this fic. if you haven't read it, you definitely should! i slipped a tiny reference into this chapter :>

and finally, to each and every person who took the time to read this fic, bookmark it, leave kudos, or support me in any way. this has been a huge journey for me and you all were the best part of it. this is likely the last homestuck fic i will post, so this ending is rather bittersweet for me, but i'm so proud to be able to say i finished this work, and so grateful that there were people at my back as i wrote it. seriously, so grateful.

i hope the new year treats you well.

and, as always, thank you for reading. <3

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