**DCstuck**

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences  
**Archive Warning:** Graphic Depictions Of Violence  
**Category:** Multi, Gen  
**Fandom:** DCU, Homestuck  
**Relationship:** Dave Strider/Karkat Vantas, Rose Lalonde/Kanaya Maryam, Sollux Captor & Aradia Megido, Past Jake English/Dirk Strider - Relationship, Terezi Pyrope & Vriska Serket, Calliope/Roxy Lalonde, Roy Harper & Koriand'r & Jason Todd, Jason Todd & Raven  
**Character:** Dave Strider, Roxy Lalonde, Jane Crocker, Jake English, Terezi Pyrope, Jade Harley, Karkat Vantas, John Egbert, Dirk Strider, Sollux Captor, Aradia Megido, Calliope (Homestuck), Rose Lalonde, Kanaya Maryam, Vriska Serket, Bruce Wayne, Barbara Gordon, Clark Kent, Dick Grayson, Oliver Queen, Dinah Lance, Jason Todd, Raven (DCU), Koriand'r, Cassandra Cain, Michael Carter (DCU), Kate Kane, Pieter Cross, Alfred Pennyworth, Catalina Flores  
**Additional Tags:** Alternate Universe - Fusion, Canon-Typical Violence, Blood and Gore, Invasion of Privacy, Strangulation, Dead Dave, Gun Violence, Temporary Character Death, Alien Biology, Alien Cultural Differences, Psychological Trauma, Mentors, Relationship Problems, Lovers to Friends, Mental Health Issues, Grief/Mourning, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, Attempted Murder, Hearing Voices, Post-Sburb/Sgrub, Polyamory, Self-Hatred, Animal Abuse, Animal Death, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Character Death, Murder  
**Series:** Part 1 of DCstuck  
**Stats:** Published: 2016-05-27 Updated: 2017-05-28 Chapters: 47/? Words: 128864

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**DCstuck**

by Vinnocent

**Summary**

Mr. Crocker raises an eyebrow. “Young man, are you suggesting we *blackmail Batman*?” he demands.

**Notes**

I pared down the tags A LOT because it was getting ridiculous. So they now show the
characters that appear frequently and early in the fic to avoid spoilers for late-comers and keep the summary from taking up a whole page, as well as showing additional tags that are most relevant or potentially upsetting. (Exceptions: Kate Kane, who appears late but is highly relevant, and Catalina Flores, who appears late but whose appearance is potentially upsetting.)
“I can’t believe we created a whole damn world, and the first thing we have to worry about is money,” Dave complains loudly as he lays on his back on a grassy hill in the middle of a park, staring up at the sunny sky. “Doesn’t John’s dad have, like, a wallet modus? What’s even in that? A fucking car? But not money, I bet.”

There’s a tiny poof in the air as an object suddenly comes into existence between Roxy’s hands and then flutters to the ground. “Okay, how ’bout now?” she asks hopefully.

Jane picks up the small dollar bill and inspects it. “No, there’s still a lot of things wrong, and… what are these smears on the White House?”

Roxy leans forward to look over Jane’s shoulder at her handiwork. “Blood-paint,” she says.

Horrified, Jane drops the bill. “For the love of god, why?!” she demands.

But Roxy just looks confused. “Um, because it’s the White House? Obviously?”

“This might go better if we actually had some money from this world for her to replicate,” Jake suggests.

“Yeah,” agrees Terezi. “You two are really jumping to a lot of conclusions about what the appropriate currency is in this universe. How do you know it will be the same as what Jane is used to?” She turns to Dave. “Jade made this universe. What would Jade consider the appropriate currency?”

“Jegus, I dunno, she grew up on a fucking island. Probably like seashells or bullets or actual live dogs.”

As if on cue, there is a much louder poof on the other side of the small grassy hill, and Dave raises up onto his elbow to look behind him at Jade, who has just popped into existence there with John clutched to her side in one arm and Karkat clutched in the other. “I found them in Australia!” she announces proudly. “There were kangaroos! It was amazing!”

Karkat frees himself like an angry cat, while John just seems to accept the fact that he will be hugged by Jade for the rest of his life now. “She chased the oversized hopbeasts,” Karkat accuses loudly, stomping toward the inhabited side of the hill. “It took two hours to get her back and remind her to take us here. Hi, Dave.”

“Hi, Karkat,” Dave says with a small smile. He flops over onto his belly so he can look at the newcomers more easily without actually getting up. There are, actually, plenty of other people around in this public park, but absolutely no one seems to give a shit about the trolls, the dog-eared girl with space powers, or their godtier pajamas. “Hey, Jade, if I wanna like, go to Starbucks and order a coffee, do I pay in shells, bullets, or actual live dogs?”

“Why would anyone give away a puppy if they had it, you monster?!” Jade demands playfully as she and John trail behind Karkat. She plops down next to him inelegantly with a loud “oomf.” “Sorry, guys, this is kind of exhausting. I need a recharge before I collect more people.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t spent two hours indulging your barkbeast parts,” Karkat grumbles, taking the other side of Dave as Jade starts braiding Dave’s hair without even asking. Whatever, he probably couldn’t have stopped her anyway.
John goes to go peer over Jane’s shoulder at her and Roxy’s activities. “Um, why are you guys making weird money?” he asks.

Jane groans while Roxy makes a constipated face of determination and starts gathering energy between her hands again. “Because we’re trying to make actual money,” Jane explains.

“Doesn’t that sort of thing, like, crash economies and stuff?” asks John.

“Well, yes, I admit I’ve thought about that,” Jane says with a sigh. “It’s by no means a permanent solution. But we do need food and soon.”

“Oh, Roxy’s powers can’t make food?”

The energy she was gathering fizzes out as Roxy and Jane exchange glances. “Well, I know what a pumpkin looks like,” says Roxy. “Oh, and also cake.”

Jane groans again, throws up her hands, and collapses backward onto the grass. “I guess!”

“No cake,” John insists.

“I can take the cake, and John can take the pumpkin,” Jake offers.

“Also, I guess I know booze, too,” Roxy says quietly. “But, I don’t wanna for, like, obvious reasons. Also, I’m pretty sure it has a very low nutritional value?”

“Yeah, let’s put that way at the bottom of the priority list,” Dave suggests. “Like, you know the paper that the priority list is written on? Okay, you know the end of the page, where there stops being paper? After that is where we can list booze.”

“Seconded,” says Jane.

“All in favor?” asks Jake, and he, Jade, John, Jane, Dave, and Karkat all raise their hands. Roxy giggles and hugs the humans closest to her. “It passes… nearly unanimously. Um… I’m sorry, I don’t want to mess up your name?”

Terezi is sniffing aggressively at the sky with that expression they’ve learned means that she is fairly irritated that she can’t reach something to lick it.

Karkat raises an eyebrow. “Her name is Terezi,” he informs Jake. “Terezi, what the fuck?”

“It’s just a speck, so I can’t tell, but that’s not one of us, is it?” she asks, pointing up.

“Huh?” Dave turns to look. There is, indeed, a speck moving through the sky. “It’s probably a… No, wait, it’s way too fast to be a bird.”

Jade buzzes briefly with green energy. “No, I can tell where all of our people are, and that’s not them. It’s a person, though! But a flying alien person!”

“…Jade, did you put trolls on this planet?” Roxy asks a bit warily.

“I… am not sure how I feel about that,” Karkat says quietly.

“No, not a troll,” says Jade. “He’s green. I mean, not green-blooded but literally green. No hair. Amazing cheekbones. Red eyes.”

“A cherub?” screeches Jane, bolting upright.
“Um, like Callie?” asks Jade. “No, he’s like 5.2 times her mass, and I guess his head shape is a little bit the same, but it’s mostly different. It kinda seems familiar, but I can’t place why. Anyway, he’s flying past now. I don’t think he noticed us, though I don’t think anyone here has cared so far?”

“Well, you did make this universe,” says Jake.

“Yeah, I didn’t realize it would be so populated already!” Jade says delightedly. “I wonder if that has something to do with the frogs you pick? Or does the game decide on its own?”

Terezi tilts her head at that like she’s caught scent of prey. “Did you have a standard by which you selected frogs?”

“Mostly the cute ones,” says Jade.

“You have a really liberal definition of ‘cute’,” Dave mutters into his arm as she continues braiding his hair. “I remember you picking up this huge black toad that looked like it regretted every single moment of its life and giggling and saying, ‘Doesn’t he look like Batman?’”

“The fuck is a Batman? That sounds horrifying,” Karkat demands.

“It is horrifying,” John assures him. “It’s a nightmare creature parents warn their kids about to make them behave.”

“She also had ones for like Clark Kent and Supergirl and I don’t remember what else; I’m not the comics nerd here.” Dave realizes then that Jade’s hands have stilled in his hair, and he looks up at her. “Are you done?” he asks.

Jade, unexpectedly, is beginning to blush vibrantly. “I… um… I remember where I know that face from,” she says.

“Oh?” asks Terezi. “Did you recreate someone from your universe?”

“… Sort of,” Jade says. Her hands drop into her lap as she begins squirming uncomfortably. “Uh, he’s, uh…. His name is Martian Manhunter.”

The humans all exchange confused glances. Finally, John says, “What on earth is a Martian manhunter?”
“Ha! Eat it, bitch!” Roxy screams, pumping her fists in the air victoriously. Dirk is immediately lurking over her shoulder to check the results himself.

Sollux very nearly throws his husktop aside in anger, but on second thought catches it with his psionics before it can smash against the wall. “This is absurd! You can’t expect proper results without a proper hiveframe to work with!”

“Can and did,” Roxy taunts him.

The air crackles with psionics, but Sollux’s tantrum is cut short when Jade appears behind him to slap him behind the horns. “Hey, cut it out!” she barks. “I put you two on opposite sides of the room, but I’ll put you in opposite hemispheres if I have to!” Sollux gives her a dubious look but does grunt what might, with some imagination, pass for an apology.

The two are, in fact, on opposite sides of a large room which had probably once been a living room. After finally collecting all nine humans (herself, Jake, John, Jane, Jane’s dad, Dave, Roxy, Rose, Dirk), six trolls (Karkat, Terezi, Kanaya, Vriska, Aradia, and Sollux), one cherub (Calliope), and one carapacian (The Mayor), Jade set about finding a new location with access to electricity and internet. She found an old house with three floors and a decrepit stairway that required flying or jumping to get across. But, for some reason, the wiring was still in place and the electricity was still on. The Scourge Sisters had immediately taken up exploration for “security reasons” the second that Dave had mentioned that it looked like every haunted house ever. Apparently, it had only taken Roxy about twelve minutes to hack herself some internet access which meant, according to their bet, that Sollux would take first and second watch for the next two nights.

Dirk glances up from Roxy’s screen. “Yup, that is the real and actual internet,” he tells Jade. “Mind calling everyone down here?”

Jade barks a laugh, and, with a flash of green light, everyone is dumped unceremoniously on the floor.

“Or you could do that.”

“Okay, everyone,” Jade announces. “Roxy has the internet up and has already appearified a modem and router. So get out your phones, tablets, laptops, sunglasses, et cetera and set to work! Each of you has your own list of some of the characters we were able to think of, so get searching. We need to know what’s real in this world and what isn’t. Also there are like twelve cakes and one raw pumpkin if anyone’s hungry.”

She sits down, and the room is immediately filled with the sound of typing, but it doesn’t stay quiet for long.

“Wonder Woman!” Aradia calls out. “She looks cool!”

“Batman and Bruce Wayne are both real,” Dirk announces.

“Clark Kent is a journalist -whatever that is-, and Superman is an alien vigilante from apparently Krypton -whatever that is-,” Karkat grumbles.

“Robin is a real tiny boy wonder, but Dick Grayson is a grownass man?” Dave says.
“I’ve got Batgirl!” says Calliope. “And Barbara Gordon! Hm… But all these entries are old?”

“Supergirl and Superboy are both real,” says Rose.

“Um, there seem to be quite a few of these… Green Lanterns?” says Kanaya. “Which am I supposed to be looking for?”

Jade leans across Sollux and Rose to get a look at Kanaya’s computer. “Hm… I dunno? I never paid any attention to him. Looks like it’s a legit hero though, so let’s call that one confirmed? Oo! More aliens!”

“Goddammit, JD, get off my lap! You can fucking teleport,” Sollux complains loudly.

“Language,” Jane’s dad warns from across the room from where he is sat between Jane and John. “Also, it may be worth mentioning that all the characters on my list are not coming up at all, even as fictional references.”

“Yeah, me either, this is bullshit,” complains Vriska.

“Hm? Who’s on your lists?” asks Jade.

“Iron Man/Tony Stark, Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff, Hulk/Bruce Banner…” says Mr. Crocker. “Thor did come up, but I don’t think it’s the one you’re looking for, if I remember those movies correctly. Captain America/Steve Rogers isn’t here. Though, I should say, the more mundane names do bring results; they just do not seem to be the right ones.”

“I’m missing Storm the person, Psylocke, Wolverine the person, Jubilee the person, Rogue the person, Mystique the person, Nightcrawler the person - You all suck at naming yourselves.-, Ms. Marvel, and Ghost Rider,” Vriska continues complaining. “Oh, and Charles Xavier, Jean Gray, Kamala Khan, and Susan Storm are all incredibly uninteresting and probably not who you're looking for.”

“Joker’s real. No one tell Gamzee,” Dave grunts.

“No one is ever going to talk to Gamzee, or I will cull them,” Vriska snarls without even looking up from her husktop.

Dave, Rose, Kanaya, Karkat, Sollux, and Aradia all look up from their various computing equipment. “Are you telling me that you still have him?” Sollux demands angrily.

Vriska looks up and blinks at him. “Hm,” she says. Then, with a flash of light, Jane’s chained-up fridge appears behind her. She glances over her shoulder at it. “It seems I forgot to leave it behind.”

“Oh my god, we’ve already doomed the new universe,” Karkat groans into his hands.

“I found Harleen Quinzel!” Terezi announces happily, completely ignoring the conversation at hand.

“I’ve got Blue Beetle!” says Jane. Then, she blushes at the fact that she had also interrupted. “Sorry, that took me a while. Mostly it’s beetles that come up, but it turns out the superhero is real, too!”

After several more hours of searching, the group as a whole comes to one unavoidable conclusion: Jade had recreated the DC universe, but not Marvel, Icon, or any other publisher. She seemed to have also recreated Milestone’s characters, but the fate of other imprints was uncertain due to everyone’s lack of familiarity with them. Then again, DC characters she hadn’t remembered but that others had, such as Powergirl, seemed to have simply followed the others into existence. All of this
had been done by simply choosing frogs that reminded her of comic book characters.

“WHY COULDN’T I HAVE CHOSEN A STORM?! DOESN’T MY IRON MAN SUIT COUNT FOR ANYTHING?!” Jade wails petulantly from the floor. “I am so disappointed in myself! AAGH!”

“Hey, so I have an idea about the money issue,” Dave announces through a mouthful of cake. He turns his laptop around to show everybody a news article of Bruce Wayne. “So this guy is completely loaded, and he very much doesn’t want anyone to know what he does with his nights.”

Mr. Crocker raises an eyebrow. “Young man, are you suggesting we blackmail Batman?” he demands.

Dave shrugs. “Well, it’s that or start an evil baked goods empire with political machinations,” he suggests pointedly.

“We have had enough cake,” John grumbles.

“Yes, the cake was definitely the worst part of that suggestion,” Dirk says.

“Look, what’s the worst that could happen?” says Dave. “We’re arrested and thrown in Arkham? Jade zaps us out. We’re shot? Blackmail isn’t bad enough for that death to be just, and it sure as hell isn’t heroic.”

“That’s… a surprisingly good point,” says Rose.

“So then I guess you’re not mad that I’ve already acted on the suggestion,” says Sollux.

“Excuse me!?” demands Mr. Crocker. “No, we can’t just - You shouldn’t - I’ve raised two of you better than this.”

“And those two haven’t lifted a damn finger in this conversation so far, so I think it’s fair to say that your so-called moral lessons have remained firmly entrenched where they were originally placed,” says Sollux. “Also, he’s already given up the funds, and I’m already moving it around. I can cover my own tracks, but I wouldn’t be mad if DK and RX got off their asses to - Thank you. Also, JD, we’re probably going to have to move as soon as we’re done. I’ve covered up any trail, but better safe than sorry.”
Sorry for the update fuckups. There were symbols being used for Sollux's name, and it previewed fine but when I published, cut out everything in the chapter past the first two. I couldn't get it to quick-fix, so I had to delete the chapter while I found a better solution.

YOU HAVE LOGGED IN TO THE ORACLE NETWORK

IDENTITY: BATMAN

> MESSAGE: ORACLE

BATMAN: I need your help ten minutes ago, and you can yell at me about not involving you more quickly later.

ORACLE: What’s up?

BATMAN: Got another hacker attempting to ransom my identity.

ORACLE: Pfft. Who are you this week?

BATMAN: Bruce Wayne.

ORACLE: OH SHIT ON IT

ORACLE: Wait, did you already pay them?

ORACLE: That’s not actually a question because I can see here that you did. The actual question is why the fuck, Bruce?

BATMAN: Because I planned to trace the money. I still am, actually, but they’re good. That’s why I called you in. I’m afraid I may soon lose the trail.

ORACLE: You’re right. You should have called me ten minutes ago.

ORACLE: Activity just dropped. If they know what they’re doing, they’re abandoning their location before we can suss it out. Right now the money is settled into seventeen accounts. Primary Hacker seems to have simply placed the money into new accounts at the First Bank of Metropolis, which doesn’t necessarily mean they’re in the Metropolis area or staying there long if they are, since that bank services 70% of the United States.

BATMAN: Were the accounts preexisting?

ORACLE: No, what I mean by normal is that if Primary Hacker had walked into the bank with all their paperwork in order and set up a personal account, it would have looked exactly like this.

BATMAN: The fact that they didn’t, that they asked for what is honestly the lowest amount either
of my identities have been threatened with and placed them in personal accounts that they had to
hack into existence, tells me that these hackers, for some reason, do not have any money of their own
or the paperwork to set up an account.

**ORACLE:** Yes, that’s my guess, too, since Primary Hacker is an alien. Or at least their system is. I
was able to grab their sysid:dez<n ▼▼ ▹▾ △ ▽ ◤ ◄ ◵ ◄

**BATMAN:** What is that?

**ORACLE:** That is Unicode failing to understand alienese and vomiting up random characters
instead.

**ORACLE:** Trust me, though, it is totes alien. And not one with technology already in my database.

**BATMAN:** Alright, I’m setting up the computer to scan all network-accessible Metropolis CCTV
for unidentified species.

**ORACLE:** Yeah, you could do that. OR

> **INVITE:** SUPERMAN

**ORACLE:** Hey, Supes, have you noticed any new off-worlders in your ‘hood?

**SUPERMAN:** Not in the past few months. What’s up?

**ORACLE:** A hacker and two friends ransomed the B-man’s identity, and we’re tracing them. The
two friends are using earth systems and coding languages, but the Primary has a system I don’t
recognize and is hacking on the binary level.

**SUPERMAN:** Wait, did they actually know his identity?

**BATMAN:** Yes.

**SUPERMAN:** Then shouldn’t this be a League matter?!?!

**ORACLE:** Chill. It literally just happened.

**BATMAN:** Right now, I’m not worried. I just want them traced and identified. Once we have that,
the League can weigh what to do with them next.

**BATMAN:** Speaking of, the cave computer just found these stills from a park this morning right
outside of Metropolis. Either of you recognize the species?

> **TRANSFER FILE:** 687687354.zip

**ORACLE:** Okay, firstly, what the hell is your numbering system, and, secondly, jpg? Really, Bats?

**BATMAN:** That’s the format they were already in.

**SUPERMAN:** I don’t recognized the gray ones, but I’ll keep an eye out. The jet-black one has a
slight disturbing resemblance to the Reach that we may want to check. I suggest asking J’onn about
the green one. And I am… not sure if those dog ears are real or not?

**ORACLE:** Ahahaha have you never seen a furry before?
**BATMAN:** Oracle, the ears and tail are moving. She also appears to have teleportation abilities.

**ORACLE:** Huh, yeah, if I go through these like a flipbook, I can see that now.

**ORACLE:** Either she is really dedicated, or we have finally been contacted by the planet Fursona, and, given what our lives are like, I’m not sure which I should bet on.

**SUPERMAN:** The answer is that you shouldn’t be gambling in the first place. I know you were raised better than that. *shakes finger at you*

**ORACLE:** Oh damn, consider me chastised.

**SUPERMAN:** Seriously, though, while I don’t like the idea, I have to admit that the quickest way to identifying them would be publishing one of these photos under some mildly scandalous headline.

**BATMAN:** Quicker but more dangerous. Right now, it looks like these children are in over their heads with something, and I’m not going to expose them just to make my own job easier. For all we know, we’d be putting up a neon sign for the actual bad guys.

**ORACLE:** Okay, I’ll keep up the traces, but you’re late for your nightshift, Bats. Go on. I can handle it.

**BATMAN:** Thank you, Oracle.

> **BATMAN has left the conversation**

**SUPERMAN:** I’ll keep an eye out for the kids during my own patrols.

**ORACLE:** Thanks, we appreciate it. If you find anything, tell me, not Bruce. If their story is sob enough, he might adopt them.

**SUPERMAN:** lol Sure thing.

> **SUPERMAN has left the conversation**
Months later...

When Dick Grayson takes the shortcut to his apartment (Thanks for the offer, Bruce, but he hasn’t fallen quite *that* low.) through Gotham Park, he doesn't really expect much activity in the still daylight hours. Maybe a couple teenage weed dealers or some hyper-aggressive assholes that still thought they were teenagers. The usual.

When Dick passes a kid with a sword strapped to his back, he decides to duck into the equipment shed and change quickly. You don’t usually carry weapons in public unless you expected to use them, so Dick expects trouble.

What he doesn't expect is that the kid with the sword doesn’t seem to be the cause of the trouble. In fact, as the kid gracefully dodges some hyena-laughing hoodlum’s attempt to shove him, he still hasn’t taken his hands out of his goddamn pockets. The hoodlum, one of several now gathering around the kid, proceeds to completely misread the situation. “You a dancer, boy?!” the hoodlum taunts, as Dick lurks just out of view, waiting to see how the situation develops. “Come through our turf decked like a fighter, but all you wanna do is fuckin’ waltz?!”

The kid tilts his head curiously. Slight movement left and right says that he's analyzing the situation, though his eyes can’t be seen past his pointy anime shades. The kid is dark-skinned and blond with perfectly styled hair, but he's also tall and broad and has now moved into a T-step, a transitional posture, ready to move into another one at the drop of a hat. Huh.


“Huh?” squawks a somewhat owlish hoodlum.

“Won’t do it again,” says Anime Shades. “I’ll just be on my way.” He doesn’t move, though, which means that he has the experience to tell that if he moves first, he's going to be in the weaker position.

“Nah, man, I don’t think so,” says Hyena. “I can’t just let any motherfucker come through our ground with some shitty-ass sword, you know? But hey, give me the sword, maybe we can skip the part where I break your face.”

Anime Shades’s lip curls just slightly. When he speaks again, it’s quiet and low. “Over my dead body.”

One of the other hoodlums jumps forward in a completely telegraphed attempt to punch Anime Shades in the jaw. Anime Shades grabs his wrist, pulls him in closer while stepping into his space, and delivers a swift chop into the guy’s armpit. The guy falls back, temporarily stunned. It's a basic-ish move, but requires dedicated practice to pull off. Dick stops wondering whether Anime Shades will need help and instead wonders whether the kid is a good guy or a bad guy and whether Dick now needs to keep tabs on him. Where did this kid even come from?

An elegant swoop brings the legs of his second attacker, Girl Hoodlum #1, out from under her while Girl Hoodlum #2 attempts to jump him from behind. Apparently, he has eyes in the back of his fucking head, because without even looking, he stands quickly, shoving his elbows backward into her stomach. She goes down like a sack of potatoes, but he’s off balance now. He makes a short misstep and then recovers within maybe half a second. The half a second that it takes Hyena to come
out with a knife.

The sword is drawn faster than Dick can even see, seemingly jumping into the kid's hand, and Anime Shades deflects the knife with it using the stiff inelegant motion of pure instinct. There's a stutter of hesitation, and where he could have cut Hyena's hand off, he instead gives a shallow slice across the arm, just enough pain to make Hyena jump back.

Dick is moving to intervene, swearing inwardly because he should have read the situation better. This was damage he could have minimized. He should have recognized the situation. This kid isn’t a hero or a villain, he’s pressure bomb, taking out anything that comes too close. *Fuck.*

Hyena yells for his buddies to take Anime Shades out, but Anime Shades doesn’t move. He’s looking at Hyena's bleeding arm. He wasn’t ready to do that. He’s freaking out. It gives Dick an opening.

Dick slides smoothly between Anime Shades and the oncoming Owly, bowing and delivering his shoulder and upper arm to Owly’s stomach, and the punk crumbles to the ground. The remaining hoodlums scramble off in multiple directions, giving up the fight the second a vigilante shows up. Eh, fuck it. This probably wouldn’t have escalated past a fist fight if it weren’t for the sword, and Dick has a bomb to diffuse.

He turns around to face Anime Shades and is startled to see twin red lights staring back at him from each lense, like eyes except for the fact that they seem to come from the lenses themselves. Creepy. The sword edge is still held away from the kid (and there's just a thin line of red along the edge), toward Dick, so Dick makes sure not to move in any closer.

“Uh… hey. You okay?” Dick forces a smile and spreads his hands palms out, though he's careful not to move them closer. “I’m Nightwing,” he says cheerfully. “And you are?”

Anime Shades swallows and looks up at him. “What?” he croaks, his voice cracking like he hadn’t just been smarting off a moment ago.

Dick keeps the smile up and dares to edge slightly closer. “I’m Nightwing. I patrol here,” he explains. “Are you okay? Are you from around here?”

“Am I -?” Anime Shades takes a moment too long to process the question, but once he does, he makes a strangle noise that might, in some distant universe, resemble a laugh. The red lights disappear from his sunglasses, and he backs up a step, eying Dick warily before sliding his very slightly bloody sword back into the hilt.

“Uh…” says Dick, kinda surprised by this turn of events. He’d kind of been thinking that the kid was some sort of well-trained prodigy, but he's becoming more and more confused by the second.

“What?” Anime Shades snaps. He’s starting to look around for the best way around Dick and out of the park.

“It’s just… um… you’re not supposed to do that.”

Anime Shades hesitates. He looks Dick over, apparently just as confused by Dick as Dick is by him. “Do what?” he demands, one corner of his lips turning down just slightly.

“You can’t sheathe a bloody sword before you clean it,” says Dick. “It could rust.”

Anime Shades’s entire body goes stiff, fists tightening.

Dick spends fifteen minutes trying to find the kid again before he gives up and returns to the equipment shed to change back into his civvies. Then, he calls Bruce Wayne. “Hey, I’m gonna give you a description, and I want you to tell me if it sounds familiar,” he tells his adoptive father. “Boy of maybe seventeen with dark skin and decent muscle development, blond hair, pointy glasses, carries - ”

“Carries a katana and is fast but not a speedster?” asks Bruce. “Yeah, that’s one of our blackmailers. Best friend of the human hacker, from what I can tell of the surveillance videos. Lives in Gotham with four others, so I’m assuming you’re asking because you came across him?”

“I just ran into him in the park in conflict with a handful of minor thugs.”

“Yeah?” says Bruce. “How’d that go?”

Dick sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “Complicated,” he grumbles. “Can I come over? Give you the details to add into the data?”

“You can come over any time,” Bruce says with a familiar gentleness to his voice. “But coming over with data makes you my favorite for the day.”

In the background, Dick hears a child’s loud protest, and he grins. “Well, now I have to,” he teases.
Case File

> OPEN: Bat-Hack


> OPEN: Bat-Hack/Primary Hacker/profile

PRIMARY HACKER PROFILE
Name: Sollux Captor (unsubstantiated)
Aliases: twinArmageddons
Species: unknown
Origin: unknown, speaks English and unknown language
Occupation: redistributing and expanding money blackmailed from Batman that one time
Capabilities: Telekinesis, Electrokinesis, Programming skills
Known locations: Bangkok, Thailand (1 known, brief). Metropolis, New York, United States (multiple, current).
Relationship to others: unknown
Assigned Monitors: Oracle, Superman, Supergirl, Superboy
Summary: Average level of aggression, but abilities are highly dangerous. Atypical psychological behavior. First to approach Batman with blackmail. Does not appear to actually understand anything about Earth and doesn’t seem to want to. Not often seen, presumed to stick to indoors. Seen only at night.
Notes: Intervene if he comes anywhere remotely near Harvey Dent. - Batman
Energy charts available.
Linguistic sample available.
Map available.
Photos available.
Videos available.

> OPEN: Bat-Hack/Secondary Hacker/profile

SECONDARY HACKER PROFILE
Name: Roxy Lalonde (confirmed)
Aliases: RoLal, tipsyGostalgic
Species: human (unsubstantiated)
Origin: unknown, speaks American English
Occupation: computer technician
Capabilities: Programming skills, Evasion techniques, Matter generation, Firearms proficiency (unsubstantiated)
Known Locations: Metropolis, New York, United States (2 known, brief). Gotham, New York, United States (multiple, current).
Relationship to others: Rose Lalonde is varyingly referred to as a sister or daughter. Dirk is referred to as “moyrail.” Jane Crocker is also referred to as “moyrail.” May be romantically involved with Calliope.
Assigned Monitors: Oracle, Nightwing, Batgirl
Summary: Low level of aggression, mostly talk, but has mentioned shooting things with a high-power rifle on multiple occasions. Has not actually been seen in possession of firearms. References to past alcoholism. Unsocialized but highly social. Seems to know nothing about America though seems to be American?? Active during sporadic hours.
Notes: I’ve been monitoring her internet activity, but aside from helping Sollux monitor the League, she seems to spend most of her time reading all of Wikipedia. - Oracle
Audio samples available.
Map available.
Photos available.
Videos available.

> OPEN: Bat-Hack/Tertiary Hacker/profile

TERTIARY HACKER PROFILE
Name: Dirk (confirmed)
Aliases: DiStri (unsubstantiated)
Species: human (unsubstantiated)
Origin: unknown, speaks American English
Occupation: unknown
Capabilities: Mechanical skills, Electrical engineering, Speed (but not superspeed), Sword proficiency, Appears to be self-trained in martial arts
Relationship to others: Refers to other Strider as brother. Refers to Roxy as “moyrail.” Former romantic relationship with at least one other person in the group.
Assigned Monitors: Oracle, Batman, Robin
Summary: Level of aggression is uncertain, but seems to prefer avoiding people in general. Always carries katana, but has only been observed using it once. Seems to clash with other members of the group and thus isolate himself from them. Unsocialized and anti-social. Seems to know nothing about America though seems to be American?? Active during sporadic hours. Though he is the least talented of the hackers, he is the most likely to delete his tracks and engage in hypervigilant behavior.
Notes: There have been references to he and his supposed brother both being from Texas, but it’s unclear if that’s a joke or not. The other has a thick southern accent, but Dirk speaks similarly to the aliens. - Batman
He uses taijiquan stances but easily switches between traditional forms and simple brawling. He is proficient enough with a sword to use it instinctively, but I don’t think he’s ever actually hurt a person with it until recently. - Nightwing
Not good with crowds. - Batman
Map available.
Photos available.

> OPEN: Bat-Hack/Dog-Girl/profile

DOG-GIRL PROFILE
Name: Harley or Jade (unconfirmed)
Aliases: Unknown
Species: Unknown
Origin: Unknown, speaks English
Occupation: Unknown
Capabilities: Teleportations, Telekinesis, Matter manipulation, Canine instincts, Firearms proficiency
Known locations: See map. Has taken up residence on Dinosaur Island.
Relationship to others: Refers to Jake as grandson?? Refers to John as brother. May or may not be romantically involved with one or more of the others. Nothing is substantiated.
Assigned monitors: Raven
Summary: High level of aggression on moral grounds; low level of aggression in general.
Never seen with weapons outside of hunting on Dinosaur Island. Extremely affectionate and keeps tabs on other team members, even helping shuffle them across various locations. Overly affectionate toward strangers. Unsocialized. Active throughout day, but most active diurnally.
Proficient with science and technology, but no hacking skills.
Notes: I took your suggestion to take on whatever partner(s) I felt best fit the task. Don’t tell Nightwing. - Raven
Audio samples available.
Energy charts available.
Map available.
Photos available.
Videos available.

Dick scowls at the computer screen. “Isn’t this getting a bit… invasive?” he asks. He turns to the two next to him, but is met with a blank look from Bruce and a disgusted look from Damian. “… Wrong crowd. Where’s Alfred?”

“Would you like for us to not keep track of the overpowered aliens that blackmailed my father?” Damian sneers.

“Okay, one: no, that’s not what I said at all. Do they not teach listening skills in assassin school?” Dick says. “Two: most of them aren’t aliens. Three: Like half of the League is aliens. That is a shitty measure by which to judge people as a threat. Fo - ”

“Most of the League is a threat,” Damian points out. “That’s why it works.”

Dick sighs exaggeratedly, looks up toward the cave ceiling, and mutters something under his breath. Bruce presses down the smirk threatening to show on his face and turned to his younger son. “Damian, he’s right. Don’t judge people for being aliens. Judge them for being overpowered.”

“That is not what I said!” Dick protests, and he totally catches the brief huff of laughter from Bruce. With a groan, he turns back to the computer. “Why did you only assign Raven to Dog-Girl, and what is this note?”

“I’m not supposed to tell you,” Bruce says, pointing to the note as though Dick somehow failed to read that part. Dick shoots him a glare, and Bruce smirks and acquiesces. “We first discussed asking Zatara to keep track of her, but several members quickly voted that it was ‘creepy’ to have an old man stalk a young girl.”

“No, instead, he’ll just keep logs of her on his computer,” Dick mumbles.

Bruce shoots him a look and continues, “So obviously, we discussed Zatanna next. However, in discussing her potential partners, we realized that the best match for Dog-Girl’s abilities was Raven.
However, as you know, Raven doesn’t work well with partnerships that she is not either in control of or has a preexisting relationship with, so she was told that she could choose her own partners if she felt that she needed them.”

“Okay?” says Dick. He doesn’t really see what the problem is with that or why it would need to be kept from him.

“After some consideration, she asked us if they had to be League-approved.”

“Why wouldn’t - ” Realization hits Dick like a sledgehammer, and he groans, burying his face in his hands. “Please tell me it’s just Starfire and not all three of them.”

“Alright,” says Bruce with unconcealed amusement.

Damian looks back and forth between the two of them, then demands. “Who is Starfire? What ‘three of them’?”

Dick freezes briefly, blushing deep scarlet at the thought of having to explain the situation to Damian. Luckily, Bruce turns to his youngest son and tells him, “I’ll tell you when you’re older.” Which, really, they both know is just a prompt for Damian to look into it on his own, but at least Dick doesn’t have to sit there while it’s explained to the new Robin how Dick’s exes have teamed up against him with another brother to go cause general chaos in the supposed name of their own fucked up morality.

And now Raven is with them. Tracking Dog-Girl. This is going to go so many kinds of wrong.
Villoes? Herains?

The first thing Ollie and Dinah see as they chase the so-called Scourge Sisters into a warehouse on Ninth Avenue is dozens of nooses. This might be somewhat threatening, given that this chase started with the attempted hanging of some mafia goon, were it not for the fact that said nooses were both tiny in size and already occupied by Ollie’s spent arrows. The only way the Sisters could have accomplished this before the chase started was if they had already known that Ollie, if not also Dinah, had been watching them since their arrival to Star City.

“I… What?” Ollie finds himself so dumbfounded that he actually stops to consider the scene. “Why?” he finally demands of the two girls, who have also come to a stop.

The short, pointy one giggles the creepiest fucking giggle that he’s ever heard. “They had to be punished!” she exclaims.

Ollie and Dinah exchange confused glances. “You hung his arrows to punish us?” Dinah says flatly.

“You… For what?” Ollie demands, incredulous.

“You… For the crime of being a shitty fucking weapon, of course!” She follows this statement by laughing her ass off.

Dinah shakes her head. “I don’t get it,” she says. “Is this you attempting to be a hero?”

“No,” says Tall Spider-Themed Pirate Girl. “I’m the hero. She’s…” She looks to Pointy, and Pointy turns toward her general direction. Pirate shrugs at Pointy.

“Enforcement!” Pointy decides.

“Enforcement of what?” Dinah asks, and Ollie kind of wishes she didn’t because he’s fairly certain the answer will only increase his migraine.

“The rules!” says Pointy. “Society is nothing without enforced structure! Surely, as the supposed heroes of this city, you understand that?”

“Supposed?” Ollie demands.

“Well, you don’t seem very good at it,” Pirate sneers. “All these bad guys you round up all day and night to do what? Send them to day camp for a little while? What is wrong with you people?”

“Day c - ? You mean jail?” Ollie demands. He throws up his hands, turning to Dinah, and protests, “Hell no! No, I’m not having another one of these conversations. The ‘why don’t we just kill them all’ conversations. Nope. I say we dump them off on the speedsters. Flash can just redistribute them every time they attempt another goddamn hanging. At least until the League can decide what to do with them.”

Pointy and Pirate exchange unreadable glances. “Are you… Are you middle leafing us and the bad guys?” Pirate asks with a disgusted tone.

Pointy is snickering. “As kinky as that sounds, I can promise you that our love of justice is completely platonic.”
“I… What?” Ollie decides that he is definitely way more disgusted by whatever the hell they’re talking about than they are. “No, you know what? Shut up. I’m going to go call Flash, and you’re gonna sit here and try not to hang anybody in the next three minutes. Black Canary?”

Dinah nods at him without removing her gaze from the freakish alien teenagers. “I’ll watch. You go make your call.”

Ollie turns to leave the warehouse but is stopped in his tracks when something is thrown at the back of his head. He turns around and looks down. “Did you just lob a stuffed animal a - ” He’s cut off when Dinah delivers a swift kick to his sternum to get him out of the way of Pointy’s dragon-headed cane as she comes at him while his attention is diverted. While Ollie’s pulling to his feet, Dinah’s already blocking Pointy’s telegraphed kicks with her own. Pirate is dodging around them, and Ollie pulls his bow and a stun arrow. He’s a crack shot - he wouldn’t have chosen this hero theme otherwise - but somehow his shots have been going wide all night, and while the Scourge Sisters are fast, they’re not that fast.

Pirate continues straight at him even as he tenses his arrow. Just as he’s releasing it, something sparks in her eye and his wrist twinges and the arrow goes wide. He’s so surprised that he almost forgets to dodge her blow at the last second. “You’re cheating!” he cries with realization. He’s not sure whether he’s more surprised, disbelieving, or offended.

She laughs at him as she spins on her heel to try another attack. “‘Cheating’ is just what losers call it when you’re more prepared than them!” She pulls something from her pocket just as she takes a swing for his head in passing, which he easily dodges, but it seems that she expected as much and was only using the maneuver to put distance between them. He turns just in time to see her toss her dice out in front of her, then tuck and roll to pick up the curved saber from where they’d been. To the left and behind her, Dinah has only barely got the upperhand on Pointy, who matches Dinah’s masterful technique and years of experience with agile speed and an apparent inability to feel pain. The blood leaking from split lip and blossoming bruises are both teal. Ollie’s met a lot of aliens who didn’t bleed red, but teal is new.

Pirate charges again, and this time Ollie pulls several of his razor-edge arrows. He wouldn’t normally use more than a stunner on a teenager, but this situation has gotten very dire very quickly. He places them, tenses his bow, and releases them all in the blink of an eye, trying to be faster to draw than she is to cheat, and he skews the odds further by tilting his bow at the last second to change the directions the arrows will come from. She does, in fact, somehow make him misfire again, but not as well as she could have, and she gets an arrow through the neck for her trouble. It’s a far worse blow than he hoped for, but at least it should be his last one that night.

In his mind, what should have happened next is that she goes down like a sack potatoes. Maybe Pointy even ceases her fight out of concern for her friend. Ollie then immediately staunches the wound and calls for medical aid while Dinah secures the scene. It’s a bad scene, worse than it needed to be, but he can manage it right away, minimize further damage, and then feel guilt for his mistake later.

What actually happens is that Pirate keeps fighting him like she hasn’t even noticed the arrow in her throat despite the fact that bright blue blood (not teal?) is soaking her t-shirt and her laughter is coming out as gurgles. Oh god, Ollie thinks as he dodges her and then dodges again, I am in way over my head. I need to call for backup. I need to -

And that’s when Dinah grabs Pirate by the neck-arrow, wrenches her sideways, and slams her face-first into the ground. Pirate stays down. Ollie looks around and sees Pointy several yards away laying on her back while pinching her nose. The bottom portion of her normally grey face is coated in teal.
from what he’s guessing is a broken nose.

Dinah tosses Pointy’s cane aside and tells him, “You should hurry up and make that call.”
It should be noted that The Outlaws aren't remotely New 52-compliant, despite the fact that that's the universe they come from. We just really like the idea of these characters being teamed up and also actually in character.

Jason Todd nearly jumps out of his skin when the campfire suddenly puffs up a cloud of black smoke that coalesces into a cloaked figure which drops elegantly down to the ground. On the other side of the fire, sawing open a can of chili with a pocket knife, Roy Harper snickers at him. “You think you’d be used to by now,” Roy mocks him.

Jason snarls at Roy, then snips at Raven, “Jesus, can’t you knock or something?”

Raven pulls back her hood and looks at him curiously. Pointedly, she then looks around at their shitty little campsite on the ocean side of the island’s volcano where their fire won’t be seen by the two kids who’ve taken up residence on the interior side of Dinosaur Island. Which isn’t a figure of speech, by the way. There are literal dinosaurs. Jason isn’t happy about it. Jason is never happy. “Knock on what?” she asks.

“I said ‘or something’,,” he huffs, but he knows that he’s quickly losing the argument.

Before this embarrassment of a conversation can continue any further, Koriand’r suddenly dive-bombs Raven with an ecstatic scream. “RAVEN!” she squeals as she squeezes Raven with all the enthusiasm of a starving python. “Oh my gosh, I didn’t expect you so soon! What an amazing surprise!”

Raven turns to mist and solidifies again out of Koriand’r’s reach, looking not at all flustered and mostly not annoyed. That is the face of someone who has known Kori for a very, very long time. “I’m afraid that our plans have changed,” she says. “We’re introducing ourselves.”

“What, right now?” Roy objects. “Raven, these kids literally kill pterosaurs on a regular fucking basis. If we’re instigating the faceoff, then I’d rather do it with a better range of vision from, you know, the sun.” He points up at the night sky just in case she still hasn’t realized the problem.

“No, we’re not facing off against them,” says Raven. “We’re going to introduce ourselves.”

“As much as I like paid vacation, I’m really starting to wonder why the hell we’re here,” Jason grumbles.

“You were here just in case they turned out villainous in a way that could only, unfortunately, be resolved with the application of violence,” says Raven. “Now, you’re here to present a friendly heroic face as we ask them to come in and to back me up if they resist.”

“If you want friendly, why are we bringing Jason and Roy?” Kori asks. She’s sitting with her back against the fire close enough that her hair should be burning, but maybe that’s not a big deal when her hair is usually burning.

So, instead of warning her to move further from the fire, Jason instead snarks, “Hey, that’s unfair!
Roy is plenty friendly when he wants to be.”

“It has to be you, because I’m fairly certain the girl already knows you’re here,” says Raven.

Roy scoffs at that. “You’re being paranoid. We’ve been sneaky as hell, and we’re rarely even on the interior side unless you give us something to look for.”

“Every night that I check in, I find her setting out three extra servings of dinosaur steak ‘just in case,’” Raven informs them, and it’s very weird to see a gothic wizard-princess making air quotes.

Roy stares in disbelief. “I could’ve been eating steak?” he demands, heartbroken.

“I told you you should’ve put a shirt on,” Jason snips at Kori.

“You put a shirt on!” she bites back.

“I have a shirt on!”

“So do I!”

“Kori, we have told you multiple times. The police have told you. That scrap of fabric does not count,” Jason argues, and she just rolls her eyes. He isn’t really serious anyway; it’s just a really old argument to revive whenever the opportunity arrises.

Raven looks in confusion between them. “I’m sorry, I… I don’t understand where Starfire’s clothing comes into this?”

Roy snorts in disbelief. “Dude, she’s literally gold and has torpedo tits,” he says, gesturing to Kori’s chest with absolutely no discretion. “It’s like traveling around with a neon sign.”

“I turned off the flames!” Kori objects.

Raven shakes her head. “I’m afraid I must not have been clear,” she says. “I don’t think they saw her, or any of you. You’re right, Roy, you’ve all been too careful. But the girl, Jade, seems to know instinctively where her friends are at any given moment. It’s not a leap of logic to surmise that this may extend to other people.”

“So it’s impossible to sneak up on them?” asks Jason. “Then why are we here?”

“It is difficult to sneak up on her,” Raven corrects. “Just as I have been matched by similar scope of ability to keep watch over her, I had matched you and Arsenal by firearms proficiency to keep watch over the boy. Starfire is good back up to have in general, and she happens to come along with the package.”

“Don’t talk about Jason’s package,” Roy snickers. “He’s sensitive.” He laughs and bats it away when Jason throws a knife at him.

“Um, okay, can I interrupt?” Kori asks, waving a hand for Raven’s attention. “We’ve already been over why we’re here and why you’re here and what we’re supposed to go do now, but… why are we doing what we’re supposed to do now? I mean, why are we trying to bring them in suddenly?”

“The two aliens in Star City were caught attempting murder. They’ve been apprehended by Black Canary with the help of Green Arrow and subsequently transported to Central City to be watched by the Flashes until the Justice League can meet. The other teams are now approaching the other groups,” Raven tells them. “Our mission is especially sensitive, however. Jade has the highest power
level and greatest range of power that we’ve seen so far. If we cannot get her to comply, we must find a way to restrain her so that she cannot abscond with the others or worse.”

“So what you’re saying is that we’re not sure the entire League will be able to handle little Jade, so the four of us will try it out first?” Roy demands.

“Yes,” says Raven. “Which is why I think we should approach with friendship first.”

Roy and Kori both turn to give Jason a pointed look. He sighs and stands, stretching out under-used muscles. “Fine, I’ll leave the helmet.”
“I can’t believe you’ve never done dishes before,” Jaime Reyes laughs as he watches a certain top floor, cheap-as-hell apartment from the roof of the slightly less crappy and slightly taller apartment building next door.

“I’ve totally done dishes!” Red Robin protests from next to him, totally not paying the least bit of attention to the apartment they’re staking out. “I don’t know what your mom was going on about.”

Spoiler, on the other side of Red Robin, is laughing her butt off. “You’ve never done dishes successfully before,” she says. “The butler always gets exasperated and kicks you out, just like Mrs. Reyes!”

Surprised, Jaime turns his attention away from the apartment to gawk at his friend. “You have a butler?” he demands.

“My dad does, shut up,” Red Robin grumbles. He snatches the binoculars from Spoiler and all but buries himself in them as he returns his attention to the job in order to hide his blush.

“Oh your dad does?” Jaime laughs. “I apologize; that’s completely different!”

“Honestly, I don’t know why you insisted on trying,” Spoiler teases him. Her phone buzzes in her pocket, and she pulls it out to look at it. To be honest, they haven’t been real strict about keeping watch in weeks. The job boils down to watching three dumb teenagers and a non-Reach insectoid of indeterminate age (and hadn’t THAT been a relief) act like three dumb teenagers and a non-Reach insectoid of indeterminate age. Over the past month and a half, Jaime had gone from relieved to take on something easy to somewhat resentful at how much productive crime-fighting he’s had to cut down on. At least he had plenty of time to get his homework done.

“We’ve been staying at their house for over a month; I can’t just not do the dishes,” Red Robin grumbles.

Jaime laughs at that. “Sorry, man, you’re gonna have to figure out another way to - ”

“Guys!” Red Robin snaps, suddenly standing rigid and pointing across the street. Jaime and Spoiler turned to see that the human guy, Dave, has run out onto the roof, in obvious distress, waving his phone about like he was trying to catch a signal. He's smeared with blood across his chest and arms.

“¿Qué c - ?” Jaime cuts himself off and decides the first word expresses enough.

Red Robin pulls out his grappling gun, but Spoiler grabs his wrist to stop him and shoves her phone at him to read. Jaime looks over his shoulder to read along.

ORACLE NET MESSAGE. ACCEPT?

> Y

GREEN ARROW: Confronted Thorn Horns and The Pirate following attempted murder.

GREEN ARROW: They were apparently attempting to bring him to justice. Thorn Horns, apparently named Terezi Pyrope, definitely has a thing about nooses, though.

GREEN ARROW: Confrontation escalated quickly to a fight. Black Canary and I have mild
bruising. Pyrope has a broken nose and cracked teeth. The Pirate (Vriska Serket) has a hole through her neck. Both are bleeding profusely but don’t seem to think that’s worrisome. Pyrope has teal blood while Serket has blue blood, so I’m not sure which of them I should be worried about most.

**GREEN ARROW:** Called in Flash for back up. Took them to security section of Flash Museum for temporary holding. Waiting further advisement on League action.

**WONDER WOMAN:** This is troubling, and we will need to address it. For now, we need to bring the others in as amicably as possible.

**SUPERMAN:** Stress on amicable. We need to try hard for the non-violent approach, guys, because we still don’t know what to expect from these kids or what they represent.

**BATMAN:** Gotham team, bring your five in to the Bat Cave. Star City team, hold where you are until further notice. Metropolis team, bring in your four to the Bat Cave. Houston team, hold your four until back up/transport arrives. Raven, try to hold your two. Teleport to Watchtower if necessary, otherwise expect to arrive last.

**NIGHTWING:** Roger.

**SUPERMAN:** Roger.

**SUPERGIRL:** Roger.

**SUPERBOY:** Roger.

**RAVEN:** Roger.

**SPOILER:** Complications. Details to come.

**ORACLE:** Spoiler, I’m tapped into your team communicators. You, Red Robin, and Blue Beetle stay on line with me, and I’ll coordinate whatever you need.

**SPOILER:** Roger.

Red Robin shoves the phone back at Spoiler, and Jaime takes that as the signal that he can go, jetting directly across the street to the other roof where Dave has been swearing profusely at his phone. The kid (He’s actually about Jaime’s age, which makes Jaime nervous as hell.) nearly jumps out of his skin at Jaime’s intrusion. What he actually does is jump back three feet and pull a broadsword out of thin air.

Jaime put up his hands quickly. “Hey, wait, I’m here to help!” he cries.

“Help?!” Dave barks out, his voice rough and bitter. “You guy’s’ve been stalkin’ us for ages, an’ only now you pop up at the worst fuckin’ moment, an’ I’m s’posed t’ believe it’s outta goddamn helpfulness?”

Jaime hears the grappling guns behind him, and he throws a hand backward to signal for the others to stay back. “You knew?” he asks.

Dave’s hold tightens on the sword, and Jaime briefly wonders where the phone went. Maybe to wherever the heck magic pocket the sword had come from? “Jade said.”

Jaime nods even though he has no idea who Jade is other than the vague recollection that maybe one
of the others in this group has a name like that. “Okay, well, yeah, we’re supposed to keep an eye on you, but like, dude, you’re covered in blood. I’m concerned.”

“Yeah?” says Dave. He lowers his sword (but doesn’t drop it) and holds out a hand. “Then give me y’r phone.”

Jaime hesitates. “Uh, what?”

The communicator that Khaji Da now integrates into his suit buzzes in his ear. “I’ve shut down their phones and internet connections,” Oracle’s computerized voice tells him. “We don’t want them communicating with Serket or Pyrope until the situation is under control.”

“Ookay,” says Jaime. And then to Dave, “Um, apparently I’m not allowed to do that?”

“Then what the fuck good are you?” Dave demands.

“I - ”

At that moment, the roof access door bangs open again, and the two horned aliens burst onto the scene. “Dave, he - What the hell?” the short, stocky one with small horns demands. From all the stalking the team has been doing, Jaime knows that Dave calls him “Karkat,” but the girl with ram horns and the insectoid call him “Krrk’t.” Ram horns seems to be universally called “Aradia,” though Karkat tends to huff out the vowels in his pronunciation and the insectoid skips them entirely making a sound more like “rrrdch.” How Khaji Da is able to tell the difference between mispronounced names and differently pronounced names is beyond Jaime, but apparently the difference is definitely there. The insectoid, meanwhile, is called “The Mayor” by all three of the others for some reason.

“Our stalkers decided now was the best time to drop by an’ say hello,” Dave informs the newcomers.

Karkat starts to say something in return, but Aradia peeks out from around him with a big goofy grin, completely missing the tone of the conversation to that point. “Oh, are they here for the corpse party?”

“The what?” Red Robin deadpans.

“Cor - He’s dead already?” Dave demands.

“Yeah, that’s what we came up here to tell you,” says Karkat.

“Wait, hold on, who is dead?!” Jaime asks, trying desperately to keep the situation under control. He's pretty sure he's not remotely succeeding at it.

“I am,” Dave growls like he’s offended that Jaime is trying to help, and maybe he is. Jaime doesn’t understand these kids at all.

“Not necessarily,” Aradia chirps. “It’s probably a Doomed Dave, or else I would have sent a Doomed Aradia to warn you about the Alpha Dave getting hurt!” And Dave seems to relax an iota until Aradia adds, “That is, unless I died before you left, in which case there’d be no remaining players to deviate the alpha.”

Dave stares at her in disbelief. “You are the queen of reassurances. It is you.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m made of time,” Aradia teases him in what must be some kind of inside joke because that reply makes no sense at all.
“Wait, hold on,” Red Robin says, finally pushing forward into the group. “Are you telling us that someone is dead?”

Dave all but growls at him. “We haven’t told you jackshit,” he says. “You’re just shoving yourselves ass-first into other people’s shit like a -”

“Dave, don’t finish that metaphor,” Karkat warns. “Look, we need to stop fucking around and…” He cuts himself off, darting a glance to Jaime, Red Robin, and Spoiler. Instead, he switches languages and says something along the lines of “Krrrrth K’naya chtcht d’rkt’thath mtr’ob chith.”

“Dude, I’m trying!” Dave tells him. “Phones aren’t working, and these assholes aren’t helping.”

“Uh, can I ask a question?” asks Jaime, which, he supposes, being a question, kind of defeats the purpose of asking, but he’s still trying desperately to convince Dave that they’re not enemies.

“No,” bites Dave.

“Uh…” Jaime considers and decides he should probably ask anyway because, for all they know, the heroes actually can help with whatever’s happening. “I just… What’s a matriorb?”

Dave and Karkat freeze in place, while Aradia looks at Jaime like he’s suddenly fascinating, and Spoiler and Red Robin just look confused. There’s two small, simultaneous bursts of energy, and suddenly Karkat is holding a sickle in each hand, and he and Dave have both dropped into defensive stances. On noticing this, Aradia causes her own tiny burst of energy to procure a whip into being, and that grin says she’s eager to use it, even if she doesn’t look a potent mixture of terrified and pissed off like the others. Oops?

Slowly, carefully enunciating every syllable, Karkat says, “How the hell do you know Alternian?”

“What’s Alternian?” Jaime says.

Spoiler literally facepalms. “Dude, that sounds fake as hell,” she says. She turns to Dave and Karkat, making a placating gesture. “Guys, Blue Beetle has a universal translator. He doesn’t know Altarian or whatever.”

“Although, I’m certainly curious as to why knowing what you’re saying has you up in arms,” Red Robin grumbles, and Spoiler hisses chastisement at him.

In Jaime’s ear, Oracle says, “Language samples are still coming back with nothing, and I can find no reference to ‘Alternian.’ Has the scarab got any insight?”

Jaime sends thought toward the scarab latched onto his spine, and Khaji Da sends back a terse No., much more interested in tracking and analyzing the three potential hostiles in front of them. “Uh, he says no, ma’am,” says Jaime, and Dave looks at him like he has also sprouted horns.

This time Red Robin facepalms. “Beetle, stop talking to it out loud.”

“I was talking to Oracle this time!” Jaime objects.

“We don’t have time for all of this fuckery!” Karkat snarls, and he ignores Aradia’s comment that they have a technically infinite amount of time. “Let us go so we can help our friends! You’re supposed to be heroes, and yet the only time you show up is to interfere and keep us from helping them! Get out of the way!”

“Which friends?” says Spoiler. “The ones in Gotham? The ones in Metropolis? Or maybe the ones in
Star City that are the whole reason we had to come confront you in the first place?”

Aradia hisses in anger but lowers her weapon. “Vrrshkaaaaaaa,” she hisses to the other two.

Karkat disappears his sickles just so he can double-hand facepalm, as Dave turns to him with an unreadable expression. “They’re moirails, you said,” Dave tells him. “They balance each other, you said.”

“I know…” Karkat groans.

“Hell no, we can’t trust Vriska, you said, but we can trust Terezi to handle her.”

“I KNOW, OKAY?!”

“You don’t think they’ll decaptchalogue her sylladex, do you?” asks Aradia, and both boys freeze.

“What is her silly-dex and why don’t you want it de-catalogued?” Spoiler asks warily.

Dave disappears his sword and then reappears a different one, disappears that and reappears what appears to be some kind of floating turntable, disappears that and reappears his first sword. “It’s that,” he says. “Thing we put shit in. And, aside from the fact that she’s got Pandora’s thermal hull in there, I’m pretty sure both their sylladexes are weaponized.”


“Like this.” Suddenly, there’s an explosion of swords, cherry bombs, throwing stars, vinyl records, and oddly shaped plush dolls, and Spoiler and Red Robin duck for cover while Jaime throws up an energy shield around them, and Dave, Karkat, and Aradia make a run for it.

A second later, Jaime is in their air, and Khaji Da is aiming, giving Jaime barely enough time to warn “Stun only!” before the scarab shoots all three at once with energy beams. Dave goes down, but apparently Khaji Da underestimated the horned aliens’ pain resistance, and Karkat stops and pulls out his weapons again to protect Dave, while Aradia disappears in a burst of… music?

Then, suddenly, Jaime’s being pulled backward and down by his throat, and Aradia uses her whip to throw him back into the roof, and Khaji Da uses the propulsion jets to slow them down and the energy shield to buffer the impact, but the landing still hurts and winds him a little. Are you sure you want to stick to stun weapons and evasion tactics? Khaji Da asks with obvious irritation. “Yes! Jesus, we talked about this!”

Aradia is flying above them, now wearing a hooded red costume, and she’s got butterfly wings that Milagro would die for. Red Robin and Spoiler shoot off their grappling hooks again, and Red Robin gets Aradia by the ankle while Spoiler gets her by the wrist, and Aradia tries to pull free and hisses at them in a way that makes her very much no longer resemble a grey-painted human with horns. The yellow sclera suddenly dominate her eyes as her irises and pupils retract to pinpricks. Her sharp teeth bare themselves completely. Her bushy hair somehow gets bushier, and, according to the scarab’s metrics, her ear canals somehow dilate. With yellow claws suddenly longer than they appeared before, she tries to tear herself free of the grappling hooks, but that’s steel cable she’s trying to tear at.

“Houston team, we’ve got reports of temporal disturbances in your area,” Oracle says in Jaime’s ear, and Red Robin, struggling to keep himself propped against an air conditioner unit instead of pulled away by Aradia’s writhing, barks back a “No kidding!” But that’s when it hits Jaime. Khaji Da picks up on his thought pattern and starts throwing data into his brain as well as onto the suit’s visual display.
“I am,” Dave had said when asked who was dying.

“Actually, we have a technically infinite amount of time,” Aradia had said when Karkat was trying to urge the heroes out of the way.

“We have to warn Kanaya about the matriorb,” Karkat had said to the others in Alternian.

> CONNECT: Oracle Network

WELCOME TO THE ORACLE NETWORK, KHAJI DA. ACCESS IS: Limited.

> OPEN: Bat-Hack


> OPEN: Bat-Hack/Gray Supermodel/profile

GRAY SUPERMODEL PROFILE
Name: Maryam Kanaya (unsubstantiated)
Aliases: unknown
Species: unknown (calls self troll)
Origin: unknown, speaks English and unknown language
Occupation: Seamstress.
Capabilities: Skin glows, Has been mentioned as combat capable but skills not yet substantiated, Something regarding breeding or rearing of some alien animal we haven’t seen yet?
Known locations: Bangkok, Thailand (1 known, brief). Gotham, New York, United States (multiple, current).
Relationship to others: Romantic relationship with Witchy.
Assigned Monitors: Batgirl, Robin.
Summary: Usually not aggressive, but overheard conversation hints that she may be the most physically dangerous. Well-mannered and refined. Does not appear familiar with Earth but is incredibly interested in it. Seen outdoors often and, unlike the other horned ETs, appears to prefer daylight hours.
Notes: If she finally takes one of the dozens of offers to do modeling, we should consider switching out her monitors for Donna and Kori. - Nightwing

Audio samples available.
Energy charts available.
Linguistic samples available.
Map available.
Photos available.
Videos available.

Karkat races up over one of the environmental units on the roof, sickles arching for the grappling cables restraining Aradia, and Dave is no longer lying prone on the rooftop, instead having disappeared, but none of that matters because for once Jaime knows exactly what he needs to do.

“GUYS! STOP!” he shouts. The battle below freezes in confusion, and Jaime turns just in time to catch Dave’s sword in his hand. (Apparently, Dave can fly even without butterfly wings.) And Jaime
could wrench the sword aside and give Dave and the aliens more stunning shots, but he doesn’t. He just holds Dave there and says, “Oracle, tell Gotham team to back down and approach warily. We have two time travelers here who have revealed that whatever it is that Kanaya has been protecting is going to be soon endangered, enough that one traveled back to attempt to prevent it. I don’t know if we cause it or someone else does, but I’m sure that if we allow this to happen, things will go very, very badly.”

“Copy. Alerting Gotham team. Do you require back up?”

Jaime lets go of Dave’s sword, and Dave sylladexes it or whatever, giving him an obviously wary glance from behind his shades. Jaime ignores the glance, drops down to the roof, and waits. One by one, people put their weapons away and fliers dropped down to the rooftop. “No, ma'am,” Red Robin finally replies to Oracle. “No backup required. Situation here is now under control.”

“Cool,” says Jaime. “Now, let's try this again.” He puts his hands on his hips and faces Aradia, Dave, and Karkat fully. “Hi, we’re Blue Beetle, Spoiler, and Red Robin. We’re part of a network of heroes that can answer any distress almost instantly. So tell me what you need.”
“Is the plan standing here all day?” Damian demands loudly. “Because that’s a stupid plan.”

“No,” Nightwing groans, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “We’re going to introduce ourselves and try to convince them to come to the cave. I just… don’t know how to do that?” He looks helplessly to Cassandra Cain. Her expression is inscrutable behind her totally black, full-faced mask. He doesn’t know why he thought she’d have advice. He’s too used to Stephanie or Barbara. Hell, even Tim would be better at this sort of thing than his current partners. They do look pretty stupid standing around on the exterior stairs of an old-as-hell apartment building, waiting for something to happen, though.

He sighs and tries to shrug off his nerves. It’s just a conversation. He can wing it, just like every other important conversation he’s ever had. He raises his hand to knock on the apartment door and is then interrupted when Cass taps his shoulder. He turns to her with a raised eyebrow, and she says, “Communicator,” pointing down at his belt. He raises his eyebrow again, and she taps one of the pointy bat ears on her helmet to indicate that Babs told her to tell him to check his communicator. He groans and digs his communicator out of his belt to check his messages.

Damian scowls up at him. “Why don’t I have my own communicator?” Damian demands, totally ignoring that Cass only has an earpiece.

“Because no one wants to know what you think, and you’re not allowed out on your own anyway,” Dick tells him, promptly ignoring Damian’s protestations to read his messages.

**ORACLE NET MESSAGE. ACCEPT?**

> Y

**ORACLE: GOTHAM TEAM BACK DOWN NOW**  
**ORACLE: BATMAN EN ROUTE AWAIT FURTHER INSTRUCTION**  
**ORACLE: REFORM TO BACK UP GOTHAM5 IF TROUBLE OCCURS OTHERWISE DO NOT APPROACH**  
**ORACLE: OMFG CHECK YOUR DUCKLING MESSAGES**

Dick raises an eyebrow at Cass. “Good thing I didn’t knock, then?” he jokes. And then, suddenly, he’s stumbling into her after what feels like a vicious punch to the shoulder followed by an oddly comfortable warmth. And then, just as suddenly, just as he’s reaching out to catch himself, the warmth spikes into burning pain, and he knows that he’s been shot in the back. Luckily, he’s been shot enough times to be able to think through the initial shock, and instead of grabbing for the railing, he grabs Damian and pulls him down under him on the stair landing so Cass can expand a shield-cloak around them, and she’s fast-thinking enough to do exactly that.

Dick rolls slightly to the side, but grabs Damian’s belt to keep him down despite the fact that his whole right arm is screaming pain at him. “Stay down, brat! Those are bullets!” he hisses.

Damian points up at the cloak that Cassie’s holding over the three of them as she crouches over them through several more shots, and he says, “That won’t last once they change bullet type or weapon.”
“Yeah, I know. Stay down so I can handle it,” says Dick. Damian scowls, but it looks like he’s going to obey (at least until he thinks he’s got a better idea), so Dick lets him go. Dick moves to get his feet under him, gets in a sprint position, and then waits for the next gunshot as whoever it is seems to be taking their sweet time with each one.

As soon as he hears that cracking boom, he’s off like, well, a bullet. Two steps, and he’s at the door, then he swerves his momentum sideways to slam his good shoulder into the door and shatter it open. Thank god for the shitty apartments in this city.

Cass and Damian stumble in after him (and somehow Damian manages to accidentally trip Cass and thus throw her directly on top of Dick and ow that girl is all muscle), but he’s not sure he’s improved their situation, because Rose is on the floor in front of him, unconscious with blood pooling under her (So much. No way is she alive. They fucked up. They fucked up so badly.), and Dirk has his sword out again while he and Maryam attempt to tear Bronze Tiger to shreds. At their intrusion, Maryam turns to face them, giving Bronze Tiger the opening he needs. He kicks Dirk right in the solar plexus and absconds through the open window he’d probably come through in the first place. Maryam lets out a loud, shrill noise that makes Dick’s teeth vibrate and then she’s out the window after Bronze Tiger. Dirk swears loudly, looks between the batkids and the window, and decides to charge the batkids.

Cass scrambles to her feet but not fast enough for Dick to get back into stance, and Dirk tackles him back to the ground with his knees in Dick’s chest, his free hand digging into Dick’s bloody shoulder, and the tip of his katana scraping lightly at the hollow of Dick’s throat. Damian and Cass both drop into stances, but it’s a standoff. Dick tries very hard not to swallow.

“Why?” Dirk growls over him. His whole body is vibrating with tension from holding back on the killing blow, and holy shit where did these kids come from?

“What?” Dick hisses, trying not to move when he speaks.

“What did you take it? What’s your aim? You been following us all this time just to hurt them? Why? What the fuck does it even matter to you? Is this some Crocker bullshit? I swear to fucking god, if you’ve damaged it, I’ll - ”

“You’re pressing too hard,” Cass says calmly, her voice slightly muffled by the mask and still stilted from well-over a decade of non-use. “You won’t get answers if you decapitate him.” She’s right. He’s losing control with every word, and Dick is starting to feel the heat of a minor cut.

Dirk glances up at her and growls again. “You might be surprised what one can accomplish with a little decapitation,” he says, and to make his point, he presses the tip harder, just enough to finally cause a real stab of pain, and it’s all Dick can do to minimize his reaction to a whine so as not to move the blade any deeper.

“Dirk, get off him,” a voice croaks behind Dirk.

Dirk jumps aside in surprise, and then suddenly he’s next to Rose, helping her to her feet and checking her over diligently. “You’re okay?” he asks a bit frantically.

“So it would seem,” she says. She frowns down at her blood-drenched dress. There’s a vicious slice across the abdomen that leaves a gaping hole in the fabric, but the skin revealed beneath is completely unharmed and even bloodless. “I think we can now say with some authority on the matter that being caught unexpectedly by a shadow-jumping villainess isn’t particularly heroic.”

“What?” Dick croaks, which, in hindsight, wasn’t a brilliant maneuver. Dirk’s attention immediately
snaps back to him, and he’s got his sword pointed at Dick’s stomach (though, luckily, not pressed into it).

“You don’t get to ask the questions right now,” Dirk growls.

“I think the shooter is gone,” Damian says, peeking out of the doorway and totally ignoring the scene inside.

“Nn,” Cass agrees, who is now leaning casually against the wall with her ankles crossed with her head tilted away from them, probably concentrating on whatever’s coming in through her earpiece. Dick feels super loved right now.

“Can I track him down now, or are we still being losers who do nothing proactive?” Damian growls.

“Losers,” Cass and Dick tell him at the same time, and Dirk’s back to vibrating with tension again. He is not taking well to going without a fight to release his anger into.

Rose finally recovers enough to stand on her own, and she pulls at Dirk’s arm. “Dirk, they’re just in the wrong place at the wrong time. They had nothing to do with this, and they didn’t know about it.”

“Were warned too late,” Cass confirms. She steps away from the wall, plucks off the batspike that contains her earpiece, and holds it out to him.

Dirk’s sword seems to directly teleport into its sheath as he abandons Dick to grab the earpiece from Cass. Dick takes the opportunity to scramble to his feet and put a little distance between himself and Dirk, even if it puts his back at the open doorway. “Why the hell would someone steal the matriorb?” Dirk demands. After a second, he hands it back. “Well, now she’s just yelling about you handing this to me.”

“Please give me a moment, and I may be able to bring some illumination to the matter,” says Rose, and she starts staring into the middle distance, and, yeah, Dick’s seen that face before. Retrocognitive ability, maybe precognitive but not enough to have warned her in time. Not without her knowing she needed to look in the first place, anyway. Finally, she turns to Dick and asks, “Have you heard of the Suicide Squad before?”

Dick groans and rubs his neck. “That’s like asking if I’ve heard of hell before.”

“A necessary evil?” asks Rose.

“More like an inevitable one,” he tells her. “Secret government-backed organization of disposable criminals to do the jobs people in power want done off the record.”

“Why would they want the matriorb?” demands Dirk.

“Uh…”

All five of them turn to see The Secondary Hacker and her green friend standing, confused, in the doorway with a coffee in each hand. “Did I miss something?” asks Roxy.

“Suicide Squad stole the matriorb,” says Rose. “Specifically, someone called Bronze Tiger. Kanaya’s chasing him. Calliope, can you track her?”

The small, green, skull-faced girl nods. “Yes, I think I know where she is,” she says with a surprisingly sweet voice for her fearsome visage.
“Dirk, go with her,” Rose directs, and Dirk is gone in the blink of an eye, seemingly snatching Calliope with him since she promptly disappears from Roxy’s side, replaced by two coffees splattered on the stair landing. Roxy starts to object, but Rose holds up a hand. “You can follow in a moment, if you think it best, but I must ask this first: Do you think that you can make another matriorb?”

Roxy looks down at the coffees in her own hands and squirms slightly, awkwardly. “I dunno. Eventually. Y’all had me make so much stuff when we started, and I’ve been sleeping in three hour shifts to stay ahead of Oracle, and I’m not Jade; I don’t have my own internal nuclear power plant, y’know? I mean, maybe with Jake’s help? The combo powers thing is hella helpful, but I just… Living things are complicated, Rosie. It was hard enough the first time. But, I mean, yeah, if I did it once, I can do it again. Probably.”

Rose scowls and gets that distant look on her face again. Finally, she sighs and nods, and takes the coffees from Roxy. “Alright, Mother, dear. You may now go find your friends. But be careful to stay clear of traffic and… Whatever you do, don’t be heroic, understand?”

Roxy grins but there’s something raw underneath it. “I will be as cowardly and evil as possible while kicking bad guy booty!” she exclaims. And then she produces a sniper rifle out of thin air and runs after her friends.

Damian scowls, looking after the way she went with confusion. “Why are you so insistent on not being heroic?” he demands.

Rose watches him with a stony expression for a moment, then waves a dismissive hand. “It’s not relevant to you,” she says. “Cassandra, please don’t bother sending backup after Bronze Tiger. My friends will recover Kanaya, but it’s unlikely we will recover the matriorb without making unnecessary sacrifices, a possibility that apparently we have already tried once.” She notices that Cass is frozen and staring at her with wide-eyes, to which she scoffs and rolls her eyes. “Sorry. I mean Batgirl.”

Rose moves stiffly to the nearby couch and collapses into it exhaustedly. “What we need to concentrate on is repairing the disastrous rift between our two groups begun by our previous financial endeavor and now exacerbated by the Scourge Sisters. It’s vital to complete the alliance as quickly and solidly as possible so that we can, together, move against Waller before she learns anything dire from the matriorb.”

“What could she learn?” asks Dick. “What is it?”

“Once hatched by Kanaya and raised to adulthood, it will be the progenitor of future members of their species, the trolls,” says Rose. “They are the last of their kind, and they cannot reproduce without a mothergrub to process the genetic material.”

Damian’s face twists in confusion. “How does an entirely different animal - ?”

But Dick clamps a hand over his little brother’s mouth and warns, “Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to,” he warns. He returns his attention to Rose. “So I see why it’s important to the ali - the… trolls?” he says. “But what could Waller learn from it?”

“As I said, it is the master key to the gestation of their species,” says Rose. “Therefore, it contains within it all the genetic knowledge of the makings of a troll, which can also be reverse-engineered into the unmakings of a troll.”

Dick scowled. “Waller distrusts all non-humans on principal, but she’s never tried genocide before.”
“She’s never seen the Scourge Sisters before,” says Rose. “Or do you truly believe this timing is coincidental?”

Dick glances back at Cass, but she’s already mumbling quietly to Oracle. He also glances at Damian, but not for input so much as to make sure that he hasn’t run off yet. (Some days, he’s this close to putting the kid on a leash.) “If they’re that dangerous, how are you sure we’ll help you?”

Rose snorts derisively and stands again to look him in the eye, despite still being about a foot shorter standing. “There isn’t any way that a single one of you heroes would simply stand by while genocide happened right in front of you,” she says. “And I can see that you know personally that individuals do not mark a species.” She surprises him by shoving one of the two coffees at him. “Please do not waste our time with needless posturing.”

He takes the coffee simply from not knowing what else to do, and she takes a sip of her own while giving him an evaluating look. She then pushes past him to the door, her clothes flickering briefly as they’re replaced by a new, unmarred set. (And Nightwing wonders briefly if he can convince her to teach him that trick.) “Now, shall we go collect my companions so that you can lead us to the Batcave as you originally intended?”

“You mean you don’t already know where it is?” Dick grumbles, rolling his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been told it isn’t really clear what happened here, but I couldn't figure out a way to clarify, so it's just going to have to be in notes: Nightshade (a villainess who is embodied shadow and can teleport via shadow) acted as the distraction by appearing suddenly within the apartment, gutting Rose, and disappearing. Kanaya and Dirk are, of course, distracted by this. (Roxy and Calliope are out of the apartment.) Bronze Tiger then uses the distraction to creep in the back and get the matriorb. Deadshot, who is acting as backup, starts shooting at the batteam when he sights them (due to them standing around too long). This alerts Kanaya and Dirk inside, who then sight Bronze Tiger and try to stop him.
Kanaya looks up from her hands when she hears the door to the Watchtower’s medical bay hiss open. Jane is accompanying in the man that had interrupted the fight in the apartment, and Kanaya has to look away just to keep her rage down. He’d apparently been innocent in the matter and, instead of going directly to medical, he had prioritized debriefing the other members of this “Justice League,” but she still can’t help feeling that they would have done better without the distraction. That Bronze Tiger would have never made it through the window. That she could have -

“Who?” asks the docterrorist in the cloaked costume without turning away from Vriska’s facial injuries.

“Nightwing and Jane Crocker,” the man says as he drops his weight wearily into one of the steel chairs. “I have a bullet in the shoulder. She’s one of the hacker associates, but she has healing powers, so it was decided that she could be allowed in if you approved.”

“Oh?” Dr. Mid-Nite finally diverts his attention from Vriska, and she takes the opportunity to pull away and hack up congealed blood into the small metal trough nearby that’s been provided for the purpose. Dr. Mid-Nite ignores this and asks, “To what extent?”

“Um, I could revive people once each,” Jane says, kneading her hands restlessly. “But that was in the… before we came here. I… I don’t know if that still works, but I guess it doesn’t matter since no one’s dead anyway?”

“Kanaya,” Terezi and Vriska say at the same time, and Kanaya shoots them a dirty look.

Jane rolls her eyes and sighs. “No one is the kind of dead that needs reviving,” she amends. “That’s aside from the point. What I can also do is boost the body’s natural healing methods so that wounds are healed faster, and that, I know, is still applicable.”

Dr. Mid-Nite nods, accepting this answer. He then waves to indicate Terezi and says, “Then, you can help Ms. Pyrope for now. Her broken nose has been reset, the blood staunched, the damaged teeth pulled, and the mess cleaned. You can encourage the healing of the bruises and, if it’s within your ability, the broken bones can be encouraged to knit back together.”

“Yes, sir,” Jane says politely before making her way over to Terezi’s side.

Nightwing is blinking at them surprised. “Wait, hold up, did you just say you pulled her teeth?” he demands. He seems to be rather horrified.

“It seems she comes with replacements,” says Dr. Mid-Nite, and, to illustrate this fact, Terezi turns toward Nightwing and opens her mouth as wide as possible, revealing her multiple rows of replacement teeth. Nightwing swears under his breath.

The room falls into uncomfortable silence while Jane lays hands on Terezi’s face and Dr. Mid-Nite carefully palpates Vriska’s jaw and cheekbones to figure out the extent of her damage. Vriska is blushing furiously. “Dude, I get that you’re blind and shit, but can’t you just ask what’s wrong with me? I swear Terezi could be licking my injuries and it would be less inappropriate.”

Dr. Mid-Nite hesitates in his actions. Finally, he says, “I’m sorry, I have no idea what to make of anything you just said.”

“Terezi’s blind and ‘sees’ with her nose and mouth,” Jane explains. “And the trolls consider facial
touching a severely romantic gesture. Feel free to ignore it, though. She’ll get over her embarrassment.”

“I’m not embarrassed!” Vriska objects. “I just thought he’d like to know how weird he’s being!”

“If you don’t mind me advising, sir,” Jane continues flawlessly. “I’m fairly certain that Vriska’s only got bruising and a very mild concussion. Kanaya is extensively damaged, yes, but she’s also undead, so she can take a lot without minding. Perhaps you should prioritize Mr. Nightwing?”

Dr. Mid-Nite pulls away from Vriska, looking grateful. “Yes, thank you for the information. That seems a good suggestion.” He heads over to Nightwing, who twists around in his chair to expose his sloppily bandaged shoulder to Mid-Nite for inspection.

“I have a question about something the doctor might not have observed,” says Nightwing. “Is it normal for their blood to range from blue to green, or are some of them sick?”

“Oh, it ranges way more than that!” Terezi tells him. “We have a whole hemospectrum! At the bottom is burgundy, like Aradia. Then bronze, like Tavros. Then gold, like Sollux. Then olive, like Nepeta. Then jade, like Kanaya. Then teal, like me. The cerulean, like Vriska. Then blue, like Equius. Then indigo, like Gamzee. Then violet, like Eridan. Then at the top is tyrian!”

Nightwing blinks at her. “I… Okay, three more questions?” he asks, and Terezi nods in agreement. “One, what do you mean ‘bottom’ and ‘top’? Two, what about Karkat Vantas? And three, you just named a lot of people that we have been previously unaware of. Where are they?”

“Allow me,” Kanaya interrupts before the Scourge Sisters can say something stupid. “Firstly, the hemospectrum was used in the society we left behind as a caste system for the subjugation of certain trolls. When she says ‘bottom’ and ‘top,’ she literally means that Aradia was in the very lowest, most oppressed caste, and that those with tyrian blood ruled us.

“Secondly, Karkat engages in the practice of hemo-anonymity. Though we have left the society that instills the hemospectrum, I still think that we should respect his wishes. After all, if the spectrum doesn’t matter anymore, then why should his wish for anonymity be relevant to anyone?

“Thirdly, though many of the people whom were just mentioned by Terezi did embark on this journey with us, I am afraid they were not able to see it to its conclusion on account of the fact Gamzee murdered Equius and Nepeta, terrorized everyone else, and was then captured by Terezi, Vriska murdered Tavros and was then subdued by John, and Eridan murdered Feferi and me and the original matriorb and attempted to murder Sollux until I revived and cleaved him with my chainsaw. Does that answer your questions?”

Nightwing stares at her, wide-eyed, long enough that she starts to feel awkward and that she may have, perhaps, behaved inappropriately. He then snaps out of it when Mid-Nite moves in front of him to address the projectile’s exit wound. Apparently, Nightwing had been so engaged by her explanations that he hadn’t noticed Mid-Nite cleaning out the entrance wound and stitching it closed.

Kanaya presses on, “I will have to take your silence for an agreement that, no, you do not have more questions out of necessity of the fact that I desperately need to ask my own: Do you yet know where the matriorb is?”

Nightwing blinks and then shakes his head, trying to clear away his jumbled thoughts. “Not yet,” he tells her. “Tracy13 and Blue Beetle are tracking it, but Suicide Squad is using Nightshade for this mission, so they’re spending a lot more time finding the trail than actually following it. Batman and Wonder Woman have gone to confront Senator Waller, but we don’t predict results from that. The
Suicide Squad is unknown to the public, but Waller is a public figure. They can’t threaten the answers out of her.”

“Honestly, it’s not worth it,” Vriska says, waving a hand dismissively, and suddenly Kanaya is glowing again and glaring across the room at her. Vriska fails to noticed and continues, “Like she said, we’ve lost the matriorb before, and Lalonde the Taller just made us a new one. So what if the bad guys steal this one and poke it with a stick? Let them think they’ve won while we just - ”

“I DON’T WANT ANOTHER ONE!” Kanaya shouts, jumping up, and Mid-Nite and Nightwing are immediately at her side, pulling her back away from Vriska, but she continues struggling and shouting, desperate to throttle the hell out of Vriska. “I didn’t want this one except out of desperation! My mother died to give me that orb, to save our people from destruction! I fought long and hard to keep it safe, to give us hope in the face of utter desolation, and it was snatched from me, and you didn’t care! None of you cared!

“I spent a sweep and a half believing that nothing we did, no victory we sought, would ever save my mother’s legacy, would ever give us a home again, and then Roxy gives me that… that duplication, and it’s not real, but it is. It’s not my mother’s orb, but it’s any orb at all. And I spent three months carefully raising it and nurturing it and encouraging it to fruition only for it be yet again torn from my hands, and all you have to say is GET ANOTHER ONE?! You’re not just vicious and self-centered; you’re an idiot!

“I can’t believe I ever felt red or pale for you! I thought these machinations of yours simply played out poorly. I thought you lacked the ability to properly estimate yourself. I pitied the way your plans fell through despite your best efforts, but none of that is true! All of that happened because you’re too stupid to see what’s really going on! Because you project your own whims and fantasies onto other people instead of actually spending five seconds observing the bloody obvious! And now, because of your idiocy, we have all been labeled a threat, and the species we live among has decided we don’t deserve genetic continuance! So take your third matriorb and SHOVE IT UP YOUR WASTECHUTE UNTIL YOU GAG ON IT!!”

Kanaya is breathing heavily, and there’s an insect-like hissing rattle coming from somewhere in her chest, but she’s stopped resisting Nightwing and Mid-Nite like maybe she’s slightly less inclined to murder Vriska now that she’s gotten all of that off her chest. Vriska, meanwhile, is staring at her with absolutely no understanding while a blank-faced Terezi stands next to Vriska with her nose bouncing like a rabbit’s as she takes quiet measure of the situation. Jane appears to have left to find help.

And then Vriska’s eyes narrow, and Terezi’s arm comes up to block her a split second before she tries to step forward toward Kanaya. Unlike Kanaya, she doesn’t resist Terezi, but she continues the argument anyway, sneering, “I would think, Kanaya, that as important as the mothergrub is to you, that you would be grateful for the fact that I gave you a world to raise it in.”

Kanaya laughs in her face. “Oh, yes, of course, Vriska! How could I be so foolish as to forget? Please, allow me to prostrate myself before you in eternal gratitude for that one time you opened a box.”

“I was vital to ensuring the success of the mission!”

“You failed in every way possible!” Kanaya countered. “You claimed it was vital Jade remain asleep, but it turned out she was instrumental to giving Becblanc the advantage over Becnoir. You claimed we needed to treat Jane like a glassgrub, but she was an invaluable fighter and her inevitable death was counteracted by the fact that we had another Jane you’d entirely forgotten about. You relentlessly abused Jake for his supposed uselessness and gave him so-called busywork, but you had vastly underestimated the threat of these villains, and we’re lucky that you underestimated Jake as
well. You abused and belittled three quarters of our team all while holding yourself up as our inevitable savior, and in the end all you did was open a box. You didn’t kill Lord English. You didn’t even give him pause. There’s no timeline or universe in which you have ever genuinely been victorious!"

“Don’t you get it?!” Vriska shouts back at her. “All that happened on purpose! You say it was luck, but you seem to have forgotten that’s my game. I told them all the wrong maneuvers so that they would do the right maneuvers because none of you airheads can be trusted to follow a simple order.”

“No, Vriska, that’s what Terezi did,” Kanaya counters, and there’s a flinch that goes through Terezi but she remains in position, keeping Vriska back from an actual brawl. “You’ve always railroaded your way through every machination only to rewrite the entire circumstance later to benefit your self-image. But it’s Terezi who has always had your number, and Terezi who has kept you in line, and Terezi who has carefully slotted you into places where your idiotic bumbling would just so happened to trip over the correct causality, and Terezi is the only reason why you are not yourself chained up in someone’s sylladex!”

“Kanaya,” Rose says sharply but without raising her voice. Everyone in the room stops and turns to the doorway where Rose is standing with Karkat and Dave behind her. Karkat and Dave look tense and on edge with their hands in position to draw weapons, but Rose keeps her body language loose and her face blank. “Batman would like to speak to you now. Nightwing, if you are done, you’ve been requested to accompany us.” It was clear that her actual point was that Nightwing was to help make sure Kanaya remained non-violent.

“Yeah, I’m done,” says Nightwing, and his fingers tense on Kanaya’s bicep (or whatever muscle she has where he’s gripping her upper arm) as he turns to her with an eyebrow raised in question. He’s not sure that he actually is done, but Mid-Nite doesn't protest, so he won't die of leaving the room at least.

Kanaya huffs in irritation and rolls her eyes. “I have never been more ‘done’ in my life,” she assures him, and she spins primly on her heel and follows Nightwing out, Rose trailing behind them. Karkat gives Vriska the stink eye before closing the door behind them all.

The room falls into silence once more, and Dr. Mid-Nite begins to gather up the supplies to put them away. Slowly, Vriska’s eyes lower to the floor in thought, and she leans back against the steel exam table. Terezi tilts her head toward her, nose still sniffing and expression still serious, but she says nothing.

Finally, Vriska says quietly, “She’s wrong about you, though. … Right?”

“She worded it to be as hurtful as possible, but we’re moirails,” says Terezi. “We’re supposed to balance each other.”

“That sounds a lot less like balance than it does an impedance weight,” Vriska grumbles.

But Terezi only shrugs. “If she’s right that our antics are the reason the matriorb was targeted… Maybe we need impedance weights. That’s our balance.” She shrugs again.

Vriska’s lips curl at the thought, but she doesn’t argue. Instead, she says, “Okay, but like… When the hell was Kanaya red for me? When did that happen?”

“For like a sweep before the game, Vriska,” Terezi says, rolling her head.

“What? No, Terezi, we were moirails then!”
“Nope.”

“You can’t just say ‘nope’! We were!”

“I can say ‘nope’ when you’re wrong.”

“I’m not wrong! I was there!”
Hey, so I'm no longer able to reply to every comment, but please know that I'm still reading them <3

When the six of them finally appeared, with Oracle’s clearance, into the arrivals area of the Justice League’s Watchtower satellite, Jade could hear the sound of people. Her friends!

Raven’s hand was on her shoulder before Jade even realized that she was gathering energy to teleport. “Remember,” she says kindly, “walking only, and flying after you get used to the area. Everyone here is jumpy, so we want to telegraph our moves.”

“It’s only a handful of murder-kids. Nothing anyone hasn’t dealt with before,” says Red Hood. Jade thought she remembered that Red Hood was supposed to be scary, but now that she’s met him, he just seems grumpy. Then again, there’s no guarantee that her Red Hood was the same as the comic book Red Hood, and she barely even remembers the character in the first place. “They could do with a little jumping.”

“I apologize for my friend,” Raven tells the kids. “Please do not take his advice.”

“You can’t apologize for me! I reject your unapproved apology,” Red Hood fake-protests while Starfire giggles behind him, and Starfire… Starfire is definitely not like the cartoon Jade remembered. Well, she is actually, in spirit. Not in body, though. Definitely not in body.

Starfire grabs Jake and Jade by the wrists and pulls them along toward the noisiest hall. “Come on! We’re last to join in, and I’ve never seen this base before!” she urges, though something about her seems nervous. Jade looks behind to see Raven starting to dissolve, but Red Hood and Arsenal have already fallen out of view, and when she taps her powers, she can tell that they haven’t even moved yet.

Starfire pulls Jade and Jake into a large round room with computer monitors covering half of the circular wall, computer banks sitting in front of them set up for multiple users, and a huge window looking out at space on the other half, and all of Jade's friends are by the window. Starfire squeals happily, drops their wrists, and jets across the room with a shout of “Nightwing!” to tackle-hug a black-clad man, tall with the lithe and sinewy build of a dancer, who startles like a rabbit. His costume has been torn in the shoulder and has a small bandage there. He pats her back awkwardly with an unreadable expression and asks her to please get off his injured shoulder. Meanwhile, Batman is staring at Jade.

Batman.

Is staring.

At Jade.

“Jade!” says John, and he happily waves her over, and she takes Jake by the hand and walks around Batman toward John like she thinks the caped crusader might be sitting on a bomb.
“Hi, John,” she says with a nervous smile, and then greets everyone else before saying, “So how much trouble are we in?”

“Both more and less than I expected,” says Mr. Crocker. “It seems Batman here isn’t too bothered by the shenanigans you kids put him through, but at the same time, our sudden appearance has recently raised concern among this, um, Justice League?” He pauses and looks at the group of heroes as if for confirmation, and Jade takes the opportunity to look, too. Crowded against the big window is all of her people, but over by the computers is a woman in a wheelchair (Oracle!), Martian Manhunter, Green Arrow, and Superman. Standing around the rest of the room is Batman, Wonder Woman, Nightwing, Starfire, Black Canary, some creepy version of Batgirl, a Robin that Jade doesn’t recognize, a second Robin???, a girl in a purple costume that looked kind of like Raven’s from the cartoon Jade remembered except that it had pants as well as a full mask under the hood, the Flash, a woman in a galaxy-print leotard that Jade was mad jealous of, and Aquaman. Raven, it seems, has disappeared to somewhere else.

“So we’ve been keeping an eye on you,” says Green Arrow. “Which apparently you already knew due to your own abilities. Our intention was only to gage your threat level. However, it means that Black Canary and I were there when two of your companions decided to murder a man.”

“What?!” shouts Jade, her ears pitched forward and her tail rigid with raised fur. “None of our people would ever - !”

“Terezi and Vriska,” Dave cuts in.

Jade loses a lot of steam pretty immediately, but she’s still fairly certain she’s right. “Okay, maybe I don’t know them as well as everyone else, but I’m still pretty sure they wouldn’t kill a guy for no reason, right?”

“Tavros,” Krakat and Kanaya say at the same time, while Sollux says, “Aradia,” and Aradia says “Me and Tavros.”

Dave shrugs and adds, “Well, I suppose it depends on whether you mean a Vriska reason - the answer to which is ‘yes, there were reasons’ - or, like, a real reason that’s reasonable to sane people - the answer to which is ‘no, there were no actual reasons for it’.”

“That said,” Rose cuts in, “you are somewhat correct, Jade. Vriska and Terezi decided to kill this man because he was a hitman for a mob boss in the neighborhood where they had taken up residence. It seems that, while Vriska initiated combat, it’s Terezi that disabled the man and then attempted to hang him, an endeavor that was put to a stop by Green Arrow.”

“Oh,” says Jade. “Well, okay, so that’s bad, but not that bad, right?”

“Yes, young lady, it is definitely that bad!” Green Arrow protests. “We may be vigilantes, but we don’t act completely outside the system in accordance to our own whims! It’s not up to us to dish out extrajudicial punishments, especially in the form of murder!” And, wow, Batman is giving Green Arrow the biggest stink-eye right now, but whatever he’s thinking, he doesn’t say it.

Instead, Arsenal pipes up, “Oh yay, looks like I got here just in time to rehash old arguments that absolutely everyone is dead tired of!” Everyone turns to the hall Jade and Jake and Starfire had come from to see Arsenal walk in with Red Hood skulking behind him. Red Hood seems to purposefully place himself no further than the doorway, communicating clearly that he does not want to participate, but Arsenal hesitates only a second before heading closer to the group and giving Green Arrow a nod of greeting. “Hey, old man, heard you got your ass kicked.”
Green Arrow rolls his eyes. “Thanks for your concern,” he says dryly. “It’s nice to see you, too.”

There’s a sort of awkward silence then that feels to Jade a lot like a standoff, and she’s not sure why. Starfire is giving Red Hood and Arsenal a look that they’re ignoring (with one arm still around Nightwing’s good shoulder), and Batman has conveniently turned his attention to the computers, whispering something to Martian Manhunter. Red Hood watches him move, then sighs and gives Nightwing the same nod Arsenal used. “Hey,” he says.

Nightwing raises an eyebrow, quizzical and slightly amused, and says, “Hi?”

“Interesting growth you’ve acquired since last I saw you,” Red Hood says, pointing to Starfire, who rolls her eyes and sticks out her tongue at him. “Maybe you oughtta have Mid-Nite investigate it.”

Nightwing smirks and says, “You know, oddly enough, it showed up the same time you did.”

Red Hood’s expression is inscrutable under his glossy red helmet, but his voice is a little lighter than it was before when he says, “I’m sure it must be a terrible inconvenience to have babes immediately flocking to your side.”

This time, it’s Nightwing who rolls his eyes, but there’s something bitter in his tone when he says, “Yeah, because I never get tired of being relegated to furniture.”

Starfire immediately lets go and backs up a step, looking like she’s been punched, and both of her friends tense like they’re about to start a fight, and whatever Nightwing’s thinking, he’s not showing it on his face anymore, but it’s at this moment that Oracle pipes up, “Guys! Shut up!” Then, “Blue Beetle, you’re clear for audio-video transmission. Go.”

One of the larger screens suddenly starts playing a video of what looks like an abandoned castle, if castles had ever once been built in the Art Deco style in the middle of Bumfuck, Nebrakoma or wherever this is. “Yeah, so we’ve tracked them here,” says a young voice, and Jade realizes that this Blue Beetle must be her Blue Beetle, Jaime Reyes, and she is at once elated and also very, very sad. “We had four life signs, and Trece says they were definitely Bronze Tiger, Nightshade, Deadshot, and Count Vertigo. Nightshade disappeared while I was talking to you, and we think she’s gone to get other bad guys. Deadshot is covering the front, and we can’t get close to the back without throwing up, which I guess explains Count Vertigo’s stupid name. There’s no way we’re recovering this thing on our own, and that’s even assuming we’re right that Nightshade didn’t take it with her.”

Batman scowls more than he was already scowling and turns to Wonder Woman. She nods as if agreeing to something unspoken, and says, “If we go in, we’ll have to use a lot of force. Try to take them down as quickly as possible. Any other method will risk the orb.”

“Forget it.” Everyone turns in surprise to Kanaya, but she’s looking at the floor. “Roxy can make another,” she says quietly. “You needn’t all go to so much trouble.”

“You literally just had a fight with Serket about this,” Nightwing reminds her.

“I didn’t like the casual attitude she was taking toward it,” Kanaya says sharply. “That she always takes to every life. But that doesn’t mean I want anyone getting more hurt over it than they already have.”

“It’s alive?” asks Superman.

Kanaya only shrugs and says, “Well, not yet. It’s still in the fetal stage.”

“Wait wait wait!” Jade cries throwing up her hands as she steps forward into the middle of the room,
facing Kanaya. “Are we talking about the matriorb? Are we all here because bad guys took the matriorb?!”

“It’s one of several events in a complex chain of misunderstandings and misfortune, yes,” says Rose.

“Oh my gosh, you’re all such buttheads sometimes, I swear!” she cries. She turns to Oracle, points at Jaime’s screen, and demands, “Where is that?”

“It’s in Idaho?” says Oracle, and she points to another screen with a map on it. And then, suddenly, Jade disappears in a flash of green light.

The gathered heroes immediately react, jumping back or stepping forward or looking toward the computers, but before anyone can do anything, Jaime says “What the - ?!” and suddenly Jade is back with the matriorb in hand. On the screen, Jaime and Tracy are discussing the weird energy burst they had sensed, and then Oracle tells them to return to the Watchtower immediately.

Jade hands the matriorb over to Kanaya, who promptly seizes it up in her arms before collapsing to her knees sobbing. Rose is immediately crouched next to her, arms over her, whispering comfort into her ear.

“Well,” says Superman. “Now that the emergency seems to be over, I guess it’s time to address the other elephant in the room. Who are you, where did you come from, and why are you here?”

The kids, trolls, and affiliated others all pause uncertainly. Finally, Dave gives a solemn nod, steps forward, and says, “Well, my name’s Dave, I’m from Texas, an’ I’m here ‘cause some guy in a bugsuit shot me in the back with an energy weapon an’ then convinced my friends to abscond with me to the moon or whatever this thing is.”

Jane facepalms and points to the huge space window behind them. “That’s the moon, Dave,” she says. “It’s right there.”

There’s the barest hint of a smirk on Dave’s face when he says, “Thass jus’ what the government wants y’ t’ think.”
Cause and Effect

Batman scowls again and says, “It’s fairly obvious where this interaction is headed, so let’s try a
different angle. How about I tell you what we already know, and, afterward, you can decide on your
own if obstinance is truly the approach you want to take?”

The kids all exchange nervous glances. No one speaks.

Batman’s eyes comb over the group, obviously deciding where to start. He settles on Calliope, and
everyone is surprised. What could anyone have to say about poor, sweet Calliope? “We’ve
obviously attempted to identify the various non-human species among your group,” he says.
“Despite our intergalactic contentions, we have failed to identify the species that we now know you
call trolls. We do, however, know of two societies of carapacians,” And the Mayor perks up with
surprise at that and looks up at Jade, but she just gives him a shrug. She supposes that she may have
included a couple frogs that reminded her of her friends on Prospit. “And, at last, Green Lantern
Corps got back to us with a very informative response regarding you, young lady.” Batman narrows
his eyes at Calliope, and she just looks confused and flustered by the attention. “You, it seems,
perfectly match the adolescent form of a species called ‘cherub,’ a species known to the Corps as an
extradimensional planet destroyer.”

John elbows Jade in the ribs and hisses into her ear, “You included cherubs?”

“He said extradimensional, numbnuts!” she hisses back. “They probably got here on their own.”

Calliope is staring across the room at the imposing figure of Batman with utter bafflement. Roxy puts
a hand on her shoulder, and there’s a slight electric buzz as she rummages through her sylladex just
in case she needs to pull something out. Finally, Calliope says, “Oh, um, am I… supposed to say
something?”

Batman says nothing.

Calliope fidgets, looks around at the crowd, and then says, hesitantly, “Yes? I’m a cherub?”

“You don’t seem to understand why we’d be concerned about that,” says Wonder Woman.

“Well… I don’t,” says Calliope. “I’m not an adult. Since I’m not dominant, I don’t even know if I
can become one. If I can, it will take a few centuries before it’s even a concern, but I don’t think I’m
a planet-destroyer type anyway. Only half of us are like that. The other half destroy planet
destroyers. Though, I suppose, at this point, you’d just have to take my word on what my personality
is like since you don’t know me very well, and I guess, then, I understand why you’d be concerned?
Except that I do know what I’m like, and I don’t know what it’s like to be you, so I don’t actually
really understand…”

“You’re lying,” says Starfire, and she’s growling. She steps forward, her huge mass of curly hair
erupting into fire, and every single one of the trolls step back on instinct. “Cherubs are born two-to-a-
body, and the souls constantly shift between passive and dominant, until they settle. Once one
becomes decidedly dominant, the passive one never wakes again, effectively dead. You cannot be
decidedly passive, or your other soul would be decidedly dominant, and we’d be talking to them.”

Calliope fidgets and looks up at Roxy. Roxy scowls and her fingers tighten on Calliope’s shoulder,
but she says, “It’s up to you whether you tell them anything, Callie. We’ll back you up no matter
what.”
“That is true,” says Calliope. “He… he did win. He was… bad. But, I…” She fidgets with the ring still on her hand even though Jade has assured her that she doesn’t need it anymore. “I was given a gift. I was resurrected separate from him, given my own form, despite my passivity.”

At that Roxy folds her arms over Calliope’s shoulders, possessively pressing Calliope’s back to her own chest, and glares challenge across the room. She says, “And no one, no bastard brother or anyone else, is ever going to take it from her again.”

Starfire and Roxy meet glares across the room, and Jade wonders briefly if she should find a way to intervene, when, unexpectedly, Starfire backs down. Surprise flickers across Starfire’s face but is immediately replaced by earnest compassion and the fire disappears from her hair (which seems unharmed for it). “You mean it,” she says with a voice like awe. “That’s… You…”

“Lord English,” says Nightwing, and every kid flinches. He’s looking at them like he’s sliding puzzle pieces together. “The guy you had to defeat to get to Earth from the troll planet. That’s his name isn’t it? And he’s Calliope’s dominant half?”

There’s a baffled exchange of glances, and then Sollux snickers. “Yeah, sure, bro,” he laughs. “Let’s go with that nook-chafingly over-simplified version of events.”

“And the trolls’ planet is…?” Superman asks.

“Non-existent,” says Karkat.

“As you mentioned, many cherubs are planet-destroyers,” Dirk adds quickly, and Jade’s not sure how she feels about the blatant misdirection, but she’s impressed by the cleverness of it.

Over by the computers, Oracle asks someone via comlink, “Would you be able to go to the far-far-future and verify that the earth is never destroyed by a planet-sized space snake?” Huh. Apparently, the Justice League has time players, too? Oops, Jade means time travelers.

Batman nods. “So somehow, the lot of you end up on a journey from somewhere that may or may not be the trolls’ home planet, escaping an oppressive society structured around blood color, and coming into conflict with Calliope’s brother. Along the way, you lost a great many people, some of them at your own hands. Kanaya Maryam and Vriska Serket are among those who have killed party members, but you seem to have forgiven at least Ms. Maryam. Several of you died along the way but somehow survived this, among them being Ms. Maryam, Jane Crocker, Aradia Megido, Dave Strider, Dirk Strider, and Calliope. Ms. Crocker claims to be able to revive the dead, but it was mentioned earlier that somehow she was revived by a duplicate of herself who seems to no longer exist. Despite this, Ms. Maryam remains explicitly undead and impervious to most otherwise deadly wounds. She’s also the only one of you that glows. Ms. Serket and Ms. Megido are also the only ones with wings, for whatever it’s worth. Despite your claims, Nightwing is convinced that Nightshade had murdered Rose Lalonde, meaning that she, at least, has the ability to self-revive.

“Speaking of abilities, Dave Strider and Ms. Megido both have time traveling ability that seems somehow tied to music, as Blue Beetle reports hearing you use your abilities. Something about the nature of these abilities means that the future version of Dave always dies after traveling backward. Jade seems to have spacial abilities, allowing transformation, resizing of matter, and awareness of where anyone is located, and is why she knew that you were all being monitored. Rose Lalonde has retrocognitive and precognitive abilities, though they don’t seem to work passively, instead requiring her direct utilization of them in order to acquire knowledge. Roxy Lalonde can generate small simple objects and, at some point previously, generated this matriorb after its predecessor was destroyed. Many of you can fly with or without wings, but only John can manipulate air. Ms. Serket has an ability to manipulate potential outcomes toward her favor. Ms. Pyrope has limited precognitive
ability. To be honest, we’re not sure about the rest of you.”

The kids, trolls, carapacian, cherub, and single human adult all exchange glances. Finally, Dirk shrugs and says, “Heart. Make of that what you will.”

Kanaya nods and says, “Space, like Jade, but much more limited.”

“Um, I’m space too, but I’ve never done anything with it,” Calliope says shyly.

“Blood,” says Karkat. “But all that seems to mean is that I’m supposed to help Kanaya with the matriorb.”

“I’m not superpowered,” says Mr. Crocker. And the Mayor clicks and points to Mr. Crocker in such a way as to indicate that this is also his answer.

“Doom,” says Sollux. “I hear the voices of the imminently dead.”

Karkat seems to be startled by this revelation, and he turns to him. “I thought that stopped being a thing once… after… the, uh…”

Sollux rolls his eyes. “That didn't keep not being a thing, bulgerot,” he snaps. “Now that we're mostly magic-fixed, I get the beautiful gift of hearing all the poor doomed alien fuckers on this gods-forsaken planet. For future reference, by the way, human migraine medications don’t work on us.”

“Is there a reason you’re skipping right over the fact that you’re an extremely powerful telekinetic?” asks Black Canary, and Sollux gives a whole-body flinch, red and blue briefly sparking between his horns, and his hands tightening and loosening at his side as he very obviously considers absconding violently.

Aradia slides her hands into his and whispers, “They have propulsion on this planet, and there are many telekinetic league members, according to your own research. You’ll be okay.”

Sollux sighs, deflates a little (though he’s still tense as hell), and glares at the floor tiles. “It’s usually troublesome if others find out about it,” he grumbles vaguely. He hesitates briefly, then adds, “Sorry for trying to trick you. Not that the voices thing isn’t true.”

“It’s understandable,” Batman says, surprising them. Something relaxes in his stance, and it dawns on Jade that he may have been on their side this entire time. “You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you? You escaped what is strongly hinted to be nightmarish circumstances, endured worse nightmares, and arrived on this planet with no resources. Somehow, you very quickly discovered my own identity and used that to your advantage, not out of spite, not because you were so brash as to think that it wasn’t a dangerous decision, but because it was the fastest way to get hold of the resources you so desperately needed. Identities, finances, basic needs.

“You knew you were being followed as a consequence, but instead of fighting this, you simply accepted this as just punishment for your actions. Unknown to either of our parties, this all attracted the attention of Ms. Waller and her lot. In the three months since your sudden and mysterious arrival, you have done nothing with your immense powers and considerable abilities until Serket and Pyrope made their heavy-handed attempts at heroism, culminating in the aforementioned attempted murder. The consequence of which was that Ms. Waller decided the trolls were too dangerous to allow, and she thus attempted to steal the matriorb to prevent the continuation of your species.”

“We’ve been discussing it while we waited for the last of your group to get here,” says Green Arrow. “Though the final fight with the Scourge Sisters was within a warehouse, Black Canary and I were seen chasing them across Star City, and the media has already uncovered their intended
victim. By tomorrow morning, they’ll inevitably appear in gossip rags as the newest villains on the scene. By the end of the week, the media will likely have uncovered the other the trolls and their ties to the rest of you; after all, you’re not really hard to notice.”

“You’re children,” says the Flash. “You’ve already been through a lot today. You don’t deserve the kind of hounding you’re bound to get if you don’t find a way to get ahead of this story.”

Dirk raises an eyebrow at that. “You already have a suggestion?” he asks.

Martian Manhunter nods and answers, “The Justice League of America would officially like to invite Aradia Megido, Calliope, Dave Strider, Dirk Strider, Jade Harley, Jake English, Jane Crocker, John Egbert, Kanaya Maryam, Karkat Vantas, Rose Lalonde, Roxy Lalonde, and Sollux Captor into our mentorship program, making your debuts in a few day’s time as Earth’s newest teen heroes.”

“This is a case-by-case basis,” says Batman. “You each agree or decline for yourselves and only yourselves. You will not have to decide as a group, and you will not be judged by the actions of the others. Ms. Serket and Ms. Pyrope may or may not have the same offer extended to them following the completion of whatever consequences come from their recent actions and following a probationary term monitored by the League. As fellow heroes, it is League policy to not force revelation of your personal information, and it is also League policy that any personal information we happened to have on anyone is not revealed without consent unless withholding this information endangers another, such as in criminal cases.”

Suddenly, everyone’s phones, tablets, and captchalogue husktops ping an alert, and Oracle turns toward them with a smirk. “Your phone and internet access has now been reactivated, and you’ll find on your devices copies of our handbook, contract agreements, official policies, and other relevant paperwork. You can each take as much time as you like to answer as the offer is indefinite.”

Wonder Woman nods in agreement and tells them, “You may stick around or go to the disembarkation bay at your leisure, and we’ll help you all get back home and settled. Misses Lalonde, your apartment has been repaired, now with more secure doors and windows.”

For a long, long moment, the kids and trolls are speechless. Finally, Roxy says, “Welp, that is not at all how I thought this was gonna go, but I am the opposite of disappointed!”
As soon as the announcement was made, Roxy was almost immediately hanging off Black Canary and begging for mentorship, promising to follow absolutely every rule and showering her in praise of her “sexibadassery.” Canary looked completely flabbergasted, and Green Arrow was laughing his ass off.

John and Aradia were both eager as well, but Mr. Crocker and Jane latched onto John and pulled him back before he could step forward and began talking quietly to him in the corner about “careful consideration” and not jumping into things and “Yes, you really should read all these files, John.” Aradia, meanwhile, asked if she could go over the documents with her legislacerator. No one knew what that meant, and when she clarified that this meant Terezi, the confusion only amplified until Karkat explained that Terezi was well-versed in troll law (but seemed to have gotten all her “human law” from television), and Dave explained that a legislacerator was “like a lawyer that often murders people before they even get anywhere near the court, but, like, legalwise murder as opposed to the kind of murder that got you legislacerated in the first place.” This, to the League’s discomfort, shed a lot of light on the Scourge Sisters’ actions.

Dave and Karkat, in turn, are immediately and absolutely adamant about their intention to never be heroes. Some warning glances from their friends prompt the League not to ask again.

Jade also seems excited about the prospect of joining, and Starfire badly wants to ask to mentor her the second she signs off on it, but when she goes and finds a spot on the floor to sit with Rose and start pouring over the documents, Starfire realizes that it’s going to be a while. She looks around for friends to talk to, but… Arsenal is actually talking to Green Arrow for once, and there is no way she’s going to interrupt that. Red Hood has already vanished. Raven had never appeared in the first place. And now Nightwing’s back is turned to her and she can’t help but think he’s mad at her for something.

She knows she saw Donna earlier, so, after some consideration, she goes to Jade and asks, “Hey, um, sorry to bother you, but I didn’t see which way my friend Donna went. I don’t suppose you could…?”

Jade blinks up at her, then looks over at the group of heroes and frowns. “Um, Donna?” she repeats. “I don’t know who that is?”

“Oh, um, she’s about yay high, human, and she wears a jumpsuit with stars on it,” says Starfire.

“Oh her!” Jade says, and it is so cute how her ears perk up excitedly. “Hold on, let me see.” She seems to concentrate, and her body briefly buzzes with green energy, and then she points down one of the adjoining halls. “Go down that hall for about ten-point-three-six meters, then turn right, right again, and then left, and then there’s an observation deck, and that’s where she’s hanging out.”

Starfire smiles brightly. “Thanks! Oh, and, um, hey, if you decide to sign on… make absolutely sure that you tell me first, okay?” She takes off in the direction that Jade gave her.

“Oh, I - Okay! Tell your friend her outfit is amazing!” Jade calls after her.

Starfire finds Donna exactly where Jade had said, and she lands next to her saying, “Jade says to tell you that your outfit is amazing.”

Donna Troy smirks and turns to her friend. “It had better be,” she teases. “It’s not like fashion is how
“I make my living. You can tell her thanks. Jade’s the one with the white dog ears and tail, right?”

“Yep!” Starfire confirms. “Oh, Donna, she’s so sweet and cute and honestly brilliant! You have no idea! And the way she just casually saves the day? I want to be her new best friend.”

Donna laughs at that. “I can’t say I’m surprised,” she says. “I take it that means the meeting is over, then?”

Starfire nods. “You left early?”

“Yeah, when the matriorb was rescued,” Donna says. “I was already up here to meet with Diana, and stood by just to see if they needed me. But I’m not really looking for a new mentee right now, and I don’t want to be any one’s jail guard, so I figured I’d wait until it all calmed down and then sneak out again.”

Starfire nods and leans against the window that Donna had been looking through. It looked out away from Earth instead of toward it and the view was more speckles of light than anything interesting. “That’s fair,” she says. “I’m glad I got to see you again, though. It’s been ages since I saw you any way but through Skype!”

Donna smirks and raises an eyebrow. “Well, that’s nice to hear,” she says. “Because I was starting to think you hadn’t even noticed I was even there.”

“What?! Donna, of course I did! Why would you - ?!”

“Tackling and clinging to Nightwing isn’t exactly subtle, Star,” says Donna.

Starfire’s stomach drops. Her gaze darts to the floor, feeling chastised. “He used to let me do that…” she mumbles. “I didn’t think… He didn’t say anything other than to switch shoulders.”

“Starfire, what he said was, and I quote, ‘Okay, that’s enough, Star, please get off, if for no other reason than that I’m injured.’”

Donna shrugs. “Your boundaries have never been great with him,” she says. “But you would’ve noticed eventually, even if he hadn’t been rude about it.”

Starfire looks back up. Blinks. Lets her friend’s words sink in. “Oh, I… Wow, I don’t usually miss tone like that,” she says. She pushes her hair out of her face and feels severely embarrassed.

Donna shrugs. “Your boundaries have never been great with him,” she says. “But you would’ve noticed eventually, even if he hadn’t been rude about it.”

Starfire looks away, out into the starry night, so like Donna’s jumpsuit. “He was right. I shouldn’t have - ”

“Star, it was supremely rude,” Donna says. “Two people can be dumb at the same time, and you two have a truly amazing track record at that.” And Starfire can’t help laughing at that. Donna lets it sit for a moment before she says, “You still love him.”

Starfire sighs. “Romance and friendship aren’t that different, Donna,” she says. “At least not for me. He’s never minded before. I even thought… After he took a little while to get over the breakup, he did start talking to me. We talked a lot. We’ve been friends for years now. Then he goes to Bludhaven, and he answers me less and less, picks up less and less, and I get concerned, and finally he says that he doesn’t have time anymore because he has almost no help in Bludhaven and that he’ll call me when he can.

“And then he just… never does. I tried to respect that, but I started worrying. I left so many messages begging just for verification that he was alive. I had to go through Oracle to find out that he was fine.
And I told myself that when he started getting more help, it would be okay, and we’d go back to normal. But now it feels like he wants nothing to do with me even though he obviously has at least enough time to come up here escorting some of the hacker kids and to stand around talking to Batman. So is there any hope for our friendship when he finally gets some relief in Bludhaven, and what is that look?” Starfire demands when she realizes that Donna is staring at her with a mix of confusion, apprehension, and conflict.

Donna frowns and looks out the window. She then looks to the floor and chews her lip. At last, she sighs, and looks up at Starfire guiltily. “Star, Dick hasn’t been in Bludhaven for over seven months. He moved back to an apartment in Gotham. Rumor is burnout, though he’s still doing the Nightwing thing.”

“Burnout?” Starfire repeats. She combs back over her memory of what happened, but, no, that doesn’t fit. She shakes her head. “He doesn’t feel worn out. He feels sad and angry, but he’s got no problem fighting.”

Donna raises an eyebrow. “He’s sad and angry, and you still tackled him?”

Starfire shrugs. “That’s what I usually do to sad friends?” she says. “Besides, I swear it initially lightened up when I arrived! I thought he was relieved! I thought - ” She sighs heavily. “This would be a lot easier if he would talk to me.”

Donna pulls Starfire into a hug, letting the taller woman stoop to bury her face in her shoulder and sniffle. “Dick’s a dick sometimes,” Donna says. “But it will resolve eventually. Everything comes out eventually. Tell you what, we’ll let our friends know something’s up with him and to keep an eye on him, and then, at the very least, you won’t have to worry about whether he’s alive anymore.”

Starfire sniffles again and nods against Donna’s neck. “Thank you. You’re such a great friend. I’m sorry I didn’t hug you first,” she says, and Donna can’t help but laugh.

“It’s goddamn raining orphans in this place. Bruce must be shitting himself with glee.”

Dick stops in the hall where he’d been making his way back to the cells to check on the Scourge Sisters. He barely manages to hide a smirk as he turns around to face his brother. “I never cease to be amazed at your ability to skulk around like a creep,” he tells Jason.

Red Hood shrugs. “Guess we each take after the old man in our own ways.”

“Take off that stupid helmet,” Dick says, rolling his eyes.

Red Hood hesitates, but in the end, he shrugs again and pulls off his helmet, smoothing his hair back with one hand. He sets it aside on the floor, which is odd, but Jason’s an odd person. “Better, princess?” he asks.

Dick rolls his eyes again. “Beautiful,” he teases. “Did you want something?”

“Yeah, actually,” says Jason.

And then he punches Dick in the face.

Raven finally appears in the room where the hacker kids had been gathered among Leaguers, coalescing shadows announcing her presence a moment before she steps out of the smoke only a few feet away from Batman. He turns to her and frowns just slightly. “Do you need something, Raven?”
he asks.

“I thought you’d like to know that your sons are brawling,” she tells him. “Again.”

He doesn’t even need to look around to know which ones she meant, but he does look around to make sure the rest of his team is still accounted for. “Spoiler,” he calls out, and when she turns to face him, he says, “Watch Robin.” And, dutifully, Stephanie clamps a hand over the nearby Damian’s mouth before he can protest. He only needs to gesture to Cassandra to have her follow him out of the room.

Before Raven can dissipate again, Wonder Woman turns to her, looking distinctly unamused, and asks, “Is there a reason you didn’t attend the meeting?”

Raven considers carefully before answering, “Yes.”

Wonder Woman seems surprised by the direct answer and considers her response just as carefully. Finally, she says, “Is it a reason that we need to be concerned about?”

Raven raises an eyebrow. “As in villainous? No,” she says. “I didn’t mean to worry you. I just… didn’t want to participate.”

Wonder Woman softens and seems to accept the answer. “Alright,” she says.

Raven nods and dissipates again, but then she feels a twinge of nuclear energy. With some regret, she pulls herself together next to Jade. “You wanted to speak to me?” she asks.

Jade practically jumps out of her skin. “Oh, wow! Almost no one surprises me!” she says. “I, um… I didn’t say anything though?”

“Your intentions are imprinted in the fabric of existence.”

“I… what?”

Raven considers the two girls before her for a moment. Rose is inscrutable, but not only does Jade show her thoughts pretty clearly, but they buzz around her in atomic movement, not that most people could read that kind of energy. Finally, she says, “You should accept Starfire’s offer.”

“Oh, I… She’s really cool and nice, but…” Jade frowns up at her. “My powers are more similar to yours? Though I don’t think I really need power training. I kind of got knowledge along with the power. But, I mean…”

“I’m sorry, but I have no intention of mentoring you or staying in longterm contact with you,” says Raven. “You… I do not wish to offend you, but it's just that you make me intensely uncomfortable.”

Jade is immediately taken aback, and even Rose looks surprised. “Oh, I didn’t… I’m sorry if I did anything that made you feel that way!” she says. “If you’ll tell me what it was, I can make sure not to do it again and also apologize more appropriately.”

Raven shrugs, a movement that feels unnatural to her but appropriately communicates her sentiment at the moment. “You didn’t do anything,” she assures Jade. “I just… I have a bad history with gods, and I’d rather not have ongoing contact with more of them.”

Raven has flashed the three of them back to the arrivals bay before she’s even stood up from the floor. “How long have you known?!” Jade all but shrieks. “Does anyone else?! Raven, we don’t want to - That’s not the kind of relationship we want with the world, and if anyone were to - ”
“Jade, I haven’t told anyone,” Raven interrupts, raising her hand in an attempt to pacify the girl. And the fact that wands have appeared in Rose’s hands, pulled from a minor pocket-dimension, has not escaped her notice. “You’ve been here almost three months. If you wanted to be known as gods, you would have announced yourselves by now. That’s why I didn’t join the meeting; I don’t like to lie, and I was sure that Batman would ask for my evaluation of you and your friends.”

“So how do you know?” asks Rose. “And how much do you know?”

“I know gods when I see them,” says Raven. “And I don’t… I couldn’t know your specifics without purposefully looking into your mind; something I would never do without consent. But I can… how do I say this? It’s sort of like I can sense your natural role in the universe. And because of that, I know that you come from outside of it. I know that most of you are literal gods, though not necessarily all-powerful ones. I know that if I had to choose only one god of all the many, many deities in this universe, to describe as the god, the breeder of the universe frog, that would be you, Jade.”

Jade and Rose exchange surprised glances. “You know about the genesis frog?” says Jade.

“Yes,” says Raven. “Though, if I may offer some advice? Don’t tell anyone about the frog. They don’t take it well.”

“You are so lucky that it wasn’t Batman who walked in on this conversation,” Jason says from across the room, and Jade and Rose jump. Raven had seen him coming, but she had assumed Jade knew as well. Apparently, sensing presences doesn’t matter if she’s distracted. Jason is pinching a bloody nose, but it doesn’t seem broken on account of the fact that he’s able to touch it at all, and he’s carrying his helmet loosely in his left hand.

“That ended faster than I expected,” says Raven.

“Meh, did what I wanted to do. Wasn’t really invested in the rest,” he says, continuing up to her. “I take it you tattled, then?”

“Yes,” says Raven. “Though, if I may offer some advice? Don’t tell anyone about the frog. They don’t take it well.”

“Of course, I did,” Raven says. She steps around the girls to meet him halfway and touches his face carefully. She feels the bruises starting to bloom along his face and stomach as well as the pure indignation and frustration that had wrought them, and she reduces the physical and emotional pain. She then untangles the anger, protectiveness, jealousy, hate, and love that had twisted together in his chest. “Better?” she asks.

Jason just grunts and put his helmet back on. He’s embarrassed, but she decides it would be manipulative rather than helpful to do something about that. “Are Arsenal and Starfire ready to go yet? We finished our jobs half an hour ago.”

“I can gather Arsenal, but Starfire is staying for now, I think,” Raven tells him, and she feels fire go off in his mind like a Molotov cocktail. She reaches out with her own peace of mind and puts a lid on it. He’s surprised by her action and unsure of whether he should be angry or grateful. “I’ll fetch him,” she says and dissipates again.

Jade, Rose, and Jason stand there awkwardly for a few moments before Rose clears her throat. Jade and Jason turn to her, and she says with a small, wicked smirk, “So… who won?”

“… Batgirl,” says Jason.

“And what, exactly, did you hear?” she asks with less teasing.

He shrugs, disinterested. “Some metaphor about the universe as a frog.”
Jade laughs awkwardly. “Ahaha, right! A metaphor is sure what it was!”

He regards her a moment, his expression hidden behind his helmet, and finally says, “Seriously, be careful who knows you have a handle on the whole goddamn universe. Whatever the limits of your powers are, if you even have limits, it’s the biggest I’ve personally seen. People fight wars to trap that kind of power for their own motives.”

Jade looks at the floor sheepishly. “I know.”

Raven reappears with Arsenal. Arsenal shoots Jason a wicked grin and tells him, “She won’t thank you, you know.”

Jason makes a growling noise. “I didn’t punch him because I thought she’d like it. I punched him because he deserves to be punched.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“Because he always deserves to be punched!”

Jade steps shyly up to Raven asks, “Um, am I supposed to go back with you, or…?”

“It’s honestly more difficult for me to transport you than it is for you to transport yourself,” says Raven. “And we are no longer your keepers. I wish you the best of luck.”

And then she, Red Hood, and Arsenal disappear.

“Awe, goddammit,” Dave groans when Jade, Rose, and a lady apparently made of smoke disappear from the room in a green flash. “I was hoping Jade would give us a ride home.”

Dirk, who had sidled up to him and Karkat the second the two announced they were never ever doing the superhero thing, cocks his head to look at Dave sideways. “Jake’s still here, so she probably just went to another room,” he says. “Why can’t you go down the same way you came up?”

“I can, but I want to get away from these fuckers as quickly as possible not invite them over for tea,” Dave grumbles, making no effort to keep his voice down. Next to him, Karkat makes a noise of assent. Looking over Karkat’s shoulder, he appears to be texting Sollux about something because god forbid one of them cross the room.

“K,” is all Dirk says.

Dave turns away from looking over Karkat’s shoulder to look at Dirk in an effort to figure out what the hell that meant. Oh hey, the red lights are on in his shades. He drops his voice and says, “Okay, firs’, don’ hack them while we’re right here t’ get our asses kicked. An’ second, tell AR that doing that makes y’all look evil.”

Dirk tenses so hard that Dave briefly wonders if he’s having a seizure or something, and then the red eye lights go off and, carefully, Dirk says, “I was just tapping their CCTV to see where Jade is. A few rooms over, by the way. Which reads to the automated programs as a safety precaution, upon which they light up the ‘evil eyes’ to warn others that ‘hey, Dirk thinks shit is going down, maybe y’all wanna get your weapons out’.”

“Oh, Roxy said it meant AR’s up t’ shit.”
“AR was always up to shit.”

Dave’s not sure why Dirk seems to be pissed off about the subject or why he’s standing so rigid. Not until Karkat frowns up at them and says, “So, like the other sprites, he didn’t make it?”

“No,” says Dirk.

“Shit man,” says Dave. “The way you use those shades, literally everyone had assumed that he just - ”

“Can we drop the topic?” Dirk interrupts.

Dave flinches. He doesn’t mean to. But that angry snarl is way too familiar, even after three and a half years. Dirk looks away and not-so-subtly shifts to a slightly further away position, and Dave isn’t sure if it’s because he’s mad or because he saw Dave flinch. Dave regrets, yet again, opening up to him before the battle. It helped clear the air a lot, but it also meant that Dirk second- and third- and fourth-guessed literally every move he made around Dave and never even considered moving in with Dave and Karkat and Aradia and the Mayor even though surely he must miss Houston even though it’s a lot less wet now and… “I miss Davesprite.”

He’s not sure if it’s the right thing to say, but it’s a thing to say, and at least Dirk’s looking at him again.

“I mean like, not as much as I missed John an’ Jade while they were gone, but I always kind of assumed that… Man, he was the one that lived, y’know? Just once, we beat the system an’ avoided a dead Dave. But nah, Paradox Space just plucked him off at the last minute anyway. I think John hoped to keep his Nana. The trolls definitely didn’t expect to lose the friends they resurrected in sprites again.” To that, Karkat lets out a heavy huff that means so many different things all at once and returns to his text conversation with Sollux. “So what I’m saying is that you didn’t have to keep it to yourself.”

Dirk shrugs and says nothing. Goes back to staring elsewhere.

Dave sighs. Well. He tried.

“No…” Dirk says at last, and instead of feeling relieved that they’re still talking after all, Dave feels the tension of the unasked question. “Do you ever wonder how set in stone our results are?”

Dave almost laughs. “Dude. Time player.” He risks a glance toward the League. They’re having an eye kept on them, but nothing more at the moment. He turns a bit so that if anyone reads lips, they won’t get much. “But I’ve got no idea where to start with that. If it’s even possible, it could take forever.”

Dirk outright smirks down at him, and it feels surprisingly good to have the approval of someone so very much like Bro. He gestures to Dave and says, “Dude. Time Player.”
Chapter Notes

You may notice some inconsistencies in formatting just due to the fact that I was trying to slap this up before I went to my grandmother's.

Also, those of you who actually know mademoisellePlume may recognize a shout out ;P

tamaraneanTerror [TT] began pestering curvedArrow [CA]
TT: i didnt think youd leave before i got a chance to explain myself!!! D:
CA: Jason got in a fight with dick AGAIN and Raven said you weren't coming so we went ahead and bailed.
CA: So was she right about Dog Girl being your new bestie or what?
TT: THAT LITTLE SHIT
TT: I CAN FIGHT MY OWN DAMN BATTLES
CA: He claims it wasn't about you.
TT: oh really?!?! so it just coincidentally happened right after we had a
TT: whatever that was
TT: >,>
CA: Well I mean him and dick in the same building is bound to turn to fisticuffs eventually. He still hasn't topped his record of Three Days Without Punching Dick.
TT: roy i will fly down there right now and badger you both until you confess all your secrets again
TT: i can get jade to tell me where you are
CA: Im at my house actually. Liang coming back from the rez in a few weeks so I was gonna have to leave the team until her next school break anyway. All her babysitters are gonna be busy with the new kids for a while. We figured that since you're aiming for a mentee that wed just split for a while.
TT: …
TT: is he mad at me?
CA: Jason?
CA: Sometimes I think you're the only person he doesn't get mad at tbh.
CA: He loves you a hell of a lot Kori. We both do.
CA: … In the friend-way. And yes English needs more words and we should all speak Phlegmy Cat Noises like you. You get my point.
TT: lol yes i know
TT: i remember the conversation we had about that
CA: Hey we all have an agreement that that conversation never happened okay? J and I have reputations to keep you know.
TT: lmao it is FAAAAAR too late to save your reps
TT: the kids have been referring to you two as the douchebag and angst guy :P
CA: …
CA: Please tell me Jason is angst guy.
TT: ill tell you which is which if you tell me what hes feeling rn
CA: I was trying Interrupty McInterruptionPants!
TT: pfft
CA: Look he loves you a lot and hell never admit it outside of that one time that never happened but he also loves dick.
CA: Grayson.
CA: Also the other kind of dick but good luck wringing that one out of him.
CA: As you already know he is eternally mad that dick got Batmans attention first. He is eternally mad for all the years people mistook him for dick, for all the times they still compare him to dick.
CA: “dick never became a rage-zombie intent on killing his own goddamn family and also the Joker” Like okay but Jason knows how to keep his costume on and never fought crime dressed for the disco so it kind of evens out if you think about it.
TT: these aren't the kind of morals you teach lian are they?
CA: As long as Im still better than her mother Im in the clear.
CA: Point is that it hurts him about as much as it hurts you when you and dick dont get along.
CA: But as you know Jason reacts to literally everything with anger.
CA: Speaking of which……………
TT: oooo that is an intriguing number of dots
CA: Got them just for you. Knew youd love them.
TT: SWOON!!
CA: Would you be okay with asking Raven to join us?
TT: pft id love it but shed never agree shes a pacifist
CA: She has been on so many teams before Kori.
TT: yes but nearly always as a shield or a buffer or a healer or something like that
TT: she hates when she has to take an aggressive position even to save people and it is our mission statement to not hold back as much as everyone else does
CA: … point
TT: was there a reason you wanted her?
CA: I have never seen Jason more chill and I want an excuse to have her around more so she can keep doing that.
TT: JASON AND RAVEN????? TELL ME MORE!!!!
CA: Sorry to disappoint but that is the least sexual tension that has ever existed between two people.
CA: Apparently when he rages she can flip a switch so its back under control easy peasy.
CA: I got Jason to admit that was what was happening. He said it was better than meds.
CA: I mean it was only a couple minor incidents and that doesn't guarantee continued results but Id sure as hell like to see him stop pirouetting off the handle every ten minutes.
TT: ill poke at raven some when i get the chance see if theres any way to get her to keep an eye on him
CA: thx
TT: oh hey im gonna follow jade back to dinosaur island and theres shitty signal there so ill talk to you later k?
TT: youre the douchebag btw
CA: THANK GOD
TT: AND NO MORE PUNCHING DICK
CA: Question: Can I punch Jason *in* the dick?
tamaraneanTerror [TT] ceased pestering curvedArrow [CA]
CA: Ill take that as a yes.

Within two days, Star City newspapers have noted Black Canary’s new, unnamed partner. Some theorize based on the outfit that she’s another archer. The media quickly decides to call her The Rogue. The story completely overshadows Terezi and Vriska being handed over to the police. That is, until a Green Lantern (John Stewart) shows up to ensure fair trial. Then, suddenly, it’s national news. The very next day, Aradia Megido makes her debut as Maid of Time next to Booster Gold, stopping a dangerous heist in downtown Houston. The two give a press conference shortly afterward in which Aradia perfectly pretends to have not known about Terezi and Vriska’s arrest, says that yes she came to earth with them, no she’s not friends with them and doesn’t know them very well, and that she hopes she will not be judged by the actions of other trolls. She successfully charms the pants
off them, and Booster looks like a proud father, and absolutely no one in the Justice League understands why Batman signed off on that partnership without even putting it to a vote. Despite the fact that she is noticeably a troll and that she is the only troll with ram horns, it is distressingly easy to keep Aradia’s identity a secret simply by putting her hair up when she’s in costume and minimizing the amount of red in her civvies.

Four days later, there’s another, much more brief press conference debuting the Heir of Breath among the Teen Titans. Despite the fact that he is human, it doesn’t go without notice that the make of his costume is similar to Aradia’s and that they both have puns for names. John’s reply, every single time the question comes up, is a ditzy, baffled, “Who?”

One week after the beginning of their partnership, Booster sends a group message through the Oracle Network that the costumes that the kids mysteriously already owned all needed body armor added. He refuses to explain how he came to this sudden revelation. The League is incredibly distressed to learn that there are holes in the kids’ apparent immortality big enough to throw a planet through, and they’d simply “forgot to mention it.”

By the end of the month, the media has finally noticed that Starfire has her own mentee in yet another monochrome, loosely fitted, hooded costume. As opposed to the three other new teenage heroes, these two don’t favor large cities or thwarting crime so much as troubles in extremely remote areas or averting natural disasters. As they don’t give a press conference, the media decides on their own to call her “The Wicked Witch” due to her striped tights and ruby slippers. The first time someone says this to her face, she quickly corrects, “That’s Ms. Witch to you, mister!!”

Jade moves into Roxy’s abandoned room in the Gotham apartment so as to be closer to the New York office of the new Anders Modeling Agency. Her identity is hidden by obscuring her ears through the use of wigs in public and the use of photoshop on her photos. The first time someone photoshops anything other than the tail and ears, Kory Anders has a very, very public fit. They’re lucky that it doesn’t result in the photographer breaking his non-disclosure agreement. Donna Troy stops by to have a conversation about what is and isn’t expected of models in the industry and how certain policies that sound good on paper could actually ruin a business, but she isn’t surprised when Koriand’r’s response is “Then I guess I’ll have to let my business fail.”

They’re all taken by surprise when the next day, there are three girls waiting outside the office hoping to get a chance at a contract. Kory regrets giving bad news to two of them, but they have no idea how to pose and are pretty bad at taking instruction and one of them refuses to tone down the potty mouth, which would be horrid for any public appearances. The one that does make it cries because she’s just so relieved that Kory doesn’t mind her hyperpigmentation and “thunder thighs.” Kory tells her that porcelain skin is boring and that “thunder thighs” is the best phrase she has ever heard.

When they open again on Monday, there’s twelve girls waiting outside, and someone has started a petition for Target to only use Anders Modeling Agency from now on, and Kory’s fit with the shitty photographer has gone viral on feminist websites.

Meanwhile, the trial of the Scourge Sisters has gone surprisingly well. It helps that their victim is entirely unsympathetic (and now on trial himself), but it usually doesn’t bode well when the jury is not actually made up of peers (because Aradia, Kanaya, Sollux, and Karkat don’t live in California, they could not be summoned to jury, and they wouldn’t have been impartial anyway). All the same, by the time the trial has begun, Terezi is halfway done with her race through a full education in US and Californian law, and is able to represent herself and Vriska so sympathetically that three jury members actually cry.
Unfortunately, this all goes to shit when someone, somehow, decaptchalogue Vriska’s sylladex as the two are lead out of the courthouse and back toward the jail. They’re lucky that no one aside from their guards was standing close enough to be seriously maimed by the fact that Vriska had, indeed, weaponized her sylladex (and Terezi and Vriska were fast enough to push their guards out of the way). However, even Terezi has a lot of trouble explaining away the fact that they hadn’t been forthcoming about the existence of their sylladexes or the fact that Vriska had been keeping another troll locked in a fridge in a pocket dimension for several months.

Hey.

This is Dirk btw.

Mr. Strider, it seems that you’re under the impression that it would be a good idea to hack my computer AGAIN.

1) Do me a favor and never say “it seems” again.

2) It’s not like I know which chat client to use or what your handle is, and to find out, I’d have to hack you anyway.

I use the Oracle Network, though it’s only accessible to associates of the Justice League, a status which you refused.

Yeah, about that.

Rose, Kanaya, and I are willing to join if you help us track down Makara. Maybe even give more info than you had before. We are pretty open to negotiation at the moment.

Makara?

Dude formerly living in a fridge.

Mr. Strider, why would I help you re-obtain someone that your admittedly murderous friend has been keeping trapped in a very small container for a horrendously long amount of time and seems to have had no intention of releasing?

Because he gives you nightmares, decapitates you, and then makes out with your head.

That last part is admittedly conjecture, but it’s believable conjecture if you know the guy.


Though I do have to ask, given what has been revealed by how many deaths have been caused by your own people… Why wasn’t he killed?

We suspect that he can’t be killed.

At no point in troll history is there record of an indigo-blood dying of anything short of a nuclear fucking bomb, which could very easily be propaganda except for the fact that on the way here there was some trippy timeline dreamworld bullshit that I won’t go into now other than to say that the trolls met a fuckload of alternate dead ghost versions of themselves and their friends and their family.

Not a single one was Makara. Though there was one indigo-blood who had died of said nuclear bomb.
Fantastic.
So this is the chapter that is the reason why the tags have a warning for rape mention. It's not very detailed, but it's there, jsyk.

The subject may come again later, as well? It's something we've discussed and even hinted at a bit, but it hasn't actually been written, and we're not going to shove it into the plot if it doesn't come up naturally...

Jake wasn’t that surprised to see a burst of flame roar across the sky above Dinosaur Island. He is surprised when it lands next to him without Jade. “Hi, Jake!” says Starfire.

“Um, hello, Miss… What should I call you?” he asks. “I usually just follow Jade’s lead and… Where is Jade?”

“I didn’t tell her I wanted to visit,” says Starfire. “I kind of wanted to talk to you alone. And you can call me Koriand’r or Starfire. It means the same thing.”

“Like… the spice?” asks Jake, and he’s so glad that she laughs at that instead of being offended.

“Sort of!” she says. “But with more growling, like a badass spice!”

Jake laughs at that, and he hopes that her willingness to joke around with means that she likes him well enough. It would be a shame if he couldn’t get along with his grandma’s mentor.

“So, has Jade told you that I’m an empath?” asks Koriand’r. “Because I am.”

Jake shakes his head. “Um, no?” he says. “I’m not… I’m not sure what that means?”

“Oh, it means that I can tell what your emotions are, even if you’re as emotionally constipated and blank-faced as the blondes with the glasses.” Suddenly, Koriand’r winces. “Aaand, apparently I shouldn’t have mentioned them?”

Jake looks away and fidgets uncertainly. “It’s fine,” he mumbles. “Does that have something to do with why you’re visiting?”

“I was curious why you’re not joining up with the others,” she says. She bows over to try to meet his gaze. “I can tell that you’ve been so eager, but you’ve held back! Now that Dirk, Rose, Jane, and Kanaya signed up to help take down Gamzee - even Sollux and Karkat and Dave joined the network on a temporary basis - I thought you would, too?”

Jake makes the mistake of looking toward her again, then squeals in terror and covers his eyes. “Ma’am, I don’t mean to offend you, but I can see down your costume!”

“Huh?” Starfire looks down and then laughs. “Oh, right, human stuff.” She stands up, then thinks better of it and takes a seat on the ground instead. “Come on, chat with me! I promise it won’t hurt.”

Jake considers, but what’s he going to do? Run away screaming from the possibility of talking about
his feelings? That’s more of a “blondes with glasses” sort of thing to do. So, he sits next to her.
“Okay, um, well, I would,” he says. “I like the idea of, of being heroic. I used to fantasize about that
sort of thing as a kid. But… This is a very serious matter. The League is a very serious organization.
I don’t think it would be right to waste your time with someone as useless as me.”

“Useless?” says Koriand’r without an ounce of judgement, sounding simply curious. “Are you
saying that you’re the only unpowered member of your entire group?”

Jake frowns and plucks at the grass idly. “Mr. Crocker, Karkat, and The Mayor don’t have powers,”
he mumbles.

“Mr. Crocker is a talented martial artist, The Mayor is a brilliant tactician, and, according to Dave,
Karkat is ‘protector of the brood,’ which is why he’s the only person Kanaya trusts to baby-sit the
Mothergrub, even over Rose.”

Jake sighs and doesn’t say anything. Koriand’r lets him. She can tell that he’s very conflicted right
now, and she doesn’t want to push too hard. She knows he’ll open up eventually, and she’s proven
right when he eventually asks, “Have they explained the hero title system to you?”

Koriand’r shakes her head. “No, what is it?”

“We each have a title that describes our powers,” he says. “Aspect says the kind of power, and class
says how it’s used. Dave is Knight of Time because he uses time to protect people. Roxy is Rogue of
Void, because she steals the non-existence from objects. Rose is Seer of Light because she can see
which future is of the most benefit, while Terezi is Seer of Mind because she can see the outcomes of
possible choices.” He plucks up another handful of grass. “You’d probably be something like…
Knight of Heart. Rose or Terezi would know, probably.”

Koriand’r smiles at him, tilting her head, and asks, “Oh? What does that mean? Knight of Heart?”

“Protector of, um, souls. Like, the people-ness of people instead of just their bodies.”

“And what are you?” asks Koriand’r, again sounding curious and earnest.

Jake glowers at the handful of decapitated weeds in his hand. “Page of Hope,” he mumbles.

There’s a pause on her end, and he can’t stand to look at her and see what she’s thinking. Finally,
she says, “What does that mean?”

Jake sighs and flops backward onto the ground. “Page means that my power is dormant until the
very last minute, which means it can’t be relied on and we won’t find out what Hope means until the
very last second. Probably all I could do is make people feel better about the fact that they’re about to
lose or something. It means I’m completely useless.”

Jake startles and scrambles away when Koriand’r suddenly bursts into flame. He crouches a few feet
away, unsure what to do. She’s on her feet again and her hands are tightened into fists at her side,
and her expression is pinched with barely restrained anger. After several minutes, the fire finally dies
down, she takes a deep breath, and she turns to Jake. With a voice low and way too even, she says,
“Don’t you ever call yourself useless again.”

“But I can’t - ”

“I’ve been enslaved.”

Jake stares at her. What is he supposed to say to that? What does she even mean? Why is it coming
Her intense green gaze is still boring into him while she says, “My sister sold me to the Gordanians, and my parents allowed it under the ‘useless’ hope that it might buy peace from the Citadel. That my people might survive the war. That we wouldn’t lose yet another Tamaran.

“I was utilized for sexual entertainment. They degraded, humiliated, beat, and raped me over and over and over and taunted me with promises of death. They wanted me to beg them for that release, but I didn’t. It wasn’t what I wanted. And I still had that. I still had the ability to decide for myself what I wanted. And then, when they tired of the rest, they used me for biological experimentation. They thought they could find a weapon for Tamaranian genocide. Instead, they gave me power. And I knew then that my hope had not been useless.

“I destroyed them, and I fled. I fled and I fled until I finally found a planet of heroes. Until I found a planet of people who would stand with me against the horrors of the universe because they genuinely believed in the hope of a better world, because they dared to hope for peace on earth, for a day when they won’t be needed.”

She steps forward and jabs Jake in the chest with a finger, and he can’t stop staring at her. “So do not ever again call yourself useless. Do not ever again believe you have no purpose. Even if it is true that all you can do is make people feel a little better when the bad is at its worst, I promise to you that you would still be the least useless among all the heroes I have ever known.”

Jake doesn’t know who hugs who first, but he spends the next twenty or so minutes clutching her tightly and crying into her bare stomach until he exhausts completely. He hasn’t cried that much since his grandma died, and he’s not surprised when Koriand’r flies off. He is surprised when she returns with a couple dinosaur eggs (There’s gonna be a pissed off raptor somewhere.), starts a fire, and cooks them for dinner. He didn’t even realize how dark it had gotten, but it had been close to nightfall when she’d arrived anyway.

When he wakes up in the morning, she’s still there. They eat breakfast in silence, and then she asks what he wants to do.

He says he would like to sign on.
Hey wow that was a massive gap wasn’t it. Uh... so things happened. But I'm here now and... updating probably irregularly? But updating. Maybe updating other fics too. We'll see.

TA: cant JD ju2t magiic locate hiim?
CG: SHE COULD EXCEPT THAT SHE HAS NEVER MET GAMZEE OR PAID ATTENTION TO HIM BEFORE, AND THERE ARE NINE BILLION PEOPLE ON THIS PLANET!
CG: NOT THAT SHE HASN’T BEEN TRYING.
TA: wow iit2 2o helpful when you exaggerate liike that.
CG: LIKE WHAT??
TA: you cant fiit 9 billion people on ju2t one planet, nookwiiff.
CG: OH MY FUCKING GOG. YES, SOLLUX, YOU CAN.
CG: SEARCH “WORLD POPULATION” ON THE HUMAN INTERNET.
TA: ii cant beliieve you ju2t saiid “gog”.
TA: al2o: wtf
CG: RIGHT?
CG: AT LEAST WE HAD THE SENSE TO TAKE OVER OTHER PLANETS TO HOUSE OUR TRILLIONS.
ORACLE: Well, that’s not at all concerning.
CG: WHAT THE EVERLOVING FUCK ARE YOU DOING IN A PRIVATE CONVERSATION??
ORACLE: Hacking, obviously.
ORACLE: I wanted to talk to Sollux, actually.
ORACLE: Before you respond, let me say that any more of your sexually explicit insults will be met with shutting down your computer.
TA: plea2e. ii already found all of your viiru2e2.
ORACLE: Is that so?

-- twinArmageddons [TA] ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

CG: I THINK YOU UNDER-THOUGHT THIS TACTIC IF YOU PLAN TO SPEAK TO HIM.
ORACLE: Oh please. I know he has multiple devices. Plus, he can just turn his computer back on. It’s not a destructive virus.
CG: HUH. I DON’T SUPPOSE YOU COULD TEACH ME HOW TO DO THAT?
ORACLE: Would you let me also teach you how to use lower case letters?
CG: HAHA. IT’S CALLED A TYPING QUIRK. ALL TROLLS HAVE THEM, AND AS FAR AS I CAN TELL A GOOD MANY HUMANS DO TOO.
ORACLE: All of the trillions of trolls?
CG: SIGH
CG: THERE *WERE* TRILLIANS OF TROLLS.
CG: THEN THERE WERE TWELVE.
CG: NOW THERE ARE SEVEN.
ORACLE: And sylladexes are troll technology?
CG: YES.
ORACLE: Then who decaptchalogued Serket’s sylladex?
CG: NO ONE COULD HAVE. THE IDIOT MUST'VE DONE IT HERSELF.
ORACLE: Has she ever done that before?
CG: SHE HAS A LONG, LONG, *LONG* HISTORY OF FUCKING UP IN EPIC WAYS AND THEN REWRITING HOW IT HAPPENED TO MAKE HERSELF LOOK BETTER.
ORACLE: So you’re certain that there wasn’t another troll there?
CG: LADY, THERE ARE NO OTHER TROLLS. THEY DON’T EXIST ANYMORE. IT’S JUST US. I KNOW FOR A FACT THIS WAS EXPLAINED TO YOU WHEN THE MATRIORB THING HAPPENED. I DON’T KNOW WHY IT IS SO HARD FOR YOU TO GRASP. PERHAPS YOUR THINKSPONGE HAS SOLIDIFIED DUE TO ALL THIS SUN EXPOSURE YOU HUMANS ARE SO FOND OF.
CG: JADE HERSELF HAS CONFIRMED THE MASSIVE LACK OF TROLLS.
ORACLE: And no trolls could hide from Jade?
CG: NOT WITHOUT VOID POWERS.

-- twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG] --

ORACLE: And no troll has had void powers?
TA: .... why are we talkiing about voiid power2?
CG: ONLY EQUiUS AND HORRUS, AND THEY ARE CERTIFIABLY DEAD.
ORACLE: Two people in your species had the power to avoid detection, but it is absolutely impossible that there were others? That *someone* other than Serket decaptchalogued Serket’s sylladex?


TA: wow
TA: diid you really have two be 2uch an a22hole about iit?
ORACLE: Did *you* really just ask me that?
TA: … point.
TA: actually, 2iince youve brought iit up, ive been wonderiing the 2ame thiing.
TA: about vrii2ka2 2ylladex ii mean.
ORACLE: Any conclusions?
TA: none.
TA: there really arent troll2 anymore. ii know the claiim look2 2u2piiciiou2 a2 hell, but there arent. iif there2 one here able two avoid JD, then were all fucked.
ORACLE: I don’t suppose you’d be willing to offer any background on that.
TA: on the ab2ence of our 2peciie2 from thii2 uniiver2e? fiine, ii gue22 ii’m bored enough for that.
TA: our planet wa2 bombarded by meteor2 until nothiing was left. and then feferii2 lu2u2 relea2ed the va2t glub, whiich kiilled all the off-world troll2, 2tartiing at the bottom of the hemospectrum and workiing up.
TA: that2 why tyriian ii2 the color of the empre22 in case you were wondering.
ORACLE: That’s… surprisingly informative. Your friends seem to think secrecy is paramount right now.
TA: that2 becau2e ii dont giive a 2hiit.
TA: the wor2t you can do is cull u2, and tbh iim pretty surprised we made iit thii2 far.
ORACLE: I can work with that. So what’s a lusus?
TA: cu2todiian.
ORACLE: Okay. So meteors destroyed the homeplanet, and Feferi’s lusus destroyed everyone else. How did your group survive?
TA: we werent in2iide the uniiver2e at the tiime.
ORACLE: Okay, sure. Whatevs. I can roll with that. So you escaped planet and species destruction,
and at that point there were twelve trolls left?
TA: fourteen for a while. twelve of u2, then the handmaaid and the empre22.
ORACLE: Your empress and her handmaid survived also?
TA: the glub doe2nt affect tyriians, obviiou2ly, and the handmaaid mii22ed iit wiith tiime fuckery.
ORACLE: So how’d it get down to seven?
TA: empre22 kiilled the handmaaid. not 2ure exactly when a2k a tiime player.
ORACLE: Player?
TA: then with us, vrii2ka kiilled tavro2 becau2e he wa2 tryiing two 2top her from doiing 2omethiing 2tupid, eriidan attempted two kiill me and 2uce22fully kiilled feferii and kanaya, gamzee kiilled and decapitated equiu2 and nepeta, kanaya woke up dead and kiilled eriidan more becau2e he 2ma2hed the matriorb than anything else, and terezii captured gamzee then attempted two kiill vrii2ka two 2top her from beiing 2tupid but john knocked vrii2ka out iinstead. eventually roxy kiilled the empre22.
ORACLE: Okay.
ORACLE: One question:
ORACLE: Are you shitting me?
TA: why the fuck would ii bother wiith 2tupiid a22hole prank2 liike that? ii have a 2kull-2pliitting miigraiine ALWAY2. ii havent got energy for that bull2hiit. the only rea2on ii talkiing two you ii2 becau2e ii dont really have an optiion about iit.
ORACLE: Sure you do! For one, you could just refuse to answer and wait for me to get bored. For another, you’ve been keeping up a general claim to be the greatest hacker ever despite the fact that Roxy usually runs laps around you, so supposedly you could shut me out if you wanted.
TA: RX II2 FULL OF 2HIIT DONT LI2TEN TO HER
ORACLE: Dude, I can see it for myself.
TA: FUCK
TA: okay fiine maybe mo2t of that ii2 braggiing but the ONLY rea2on RX ever 2urpa22e2 me ii2 becau2e 2he grew up with your fucked up backward a22e2机械化 2y2tem2.
TA: iiif ii had a proper hiiveframe, 2he would be eatiing my du2t.
ORACLE: Troll technology is based on organic systems?
TA: ye2.
ORACLE: Okay then.
TA: .... okay??
ORACLE: Dude, we have encountered so many alien technological systems, you don’t even know. A hell of a lot of them were organic-based. Work with us, and we’ll help you figure out how to reconstruct trolltech.
TA: what would you get out of iit?
ORACLE: One less of you that hates us would be nice, but to be honest, I did start this conversation because I wanted something.
ORACLE: What you said at the meeting about the voices of the imminently deceased? I’ve been thinking about it.
ORACLE: I know you’re completely disinterested in the heroism thing, and that’s cool. Your right. But I still think you have the potential to be an invaluable member of the team!
ORACLE: I’m not sure it really is possible at this point, but I would like to try feeding your voices into a database and using an algorithm to sort and analyze them at lightning speed and maybe just maybe being able to set up a warning system.
ORACLE: It probably won’t work on an individual basis, but if hundreds are crying out because of a tsunami or whatever? Maybe we can do something. I know it’s a stretch, but isn’t it worth a shot?
ORACLE: Sollux?
ORACLE: Captor?
ORACLE: You still there?
TA: over my dead body
ORACLE NETWORK HAS EXPLODED!
The first sign that anything is wrong is when the Watchtower shakes, groans, and then goes black. Which, as signs go, is a fairly clear one. The lights soon come back on again, but the second Dr. Mid-Nite tries to contact anyone, he discovers the second sign that anything is wrong: The entire communications grid and computer system is down.

Jane, luckily, is not panicking. He kind of expected she would. Many grown adults have panicked in such situations, at least briefly. Instead, she asks, “So… should I get my fork or just stay here?”

Before he can answer, there is a knock on the main doors to the medical bay. (Whoever was on the other side apparently could not find the button that opened them.) “Both, and get your armor up,” Mid-Nite decides instantaneously. In a flash of her sylladex, Jane is decked out in tan and brown with a green wavy-lined crest on the chest. The costume now features some leather padding, but not kevlar or metal plates. Somehow, in a way they don’t seem able to actually explain, the costumes of the newcomers are at least partially mental constructs, and require a visualization-into-actualization technique none of them had previously used in order to have aspects changed. In the meantime, Starfire had taken on the job of designing new wholly physical costumes for them, with Batman promising to produce the final designs. However, Jane’s new costume is at the bottom of the list in question due to the fact that she isn’t supposed to be involved in combat. Another sylladex buzz puts her ridiculous battle fork in her right hand.

Warily, Mid-Nite approaches the door, drops into a fighting stance just in case, and presses the button for the doors to open. Standing there is Batwoman, grinning a bloody grin as she holds her side. The smell of blood is pungent. “Looks like I got here just in time to avoid the blackouts,” she says. She’s wobbling a bit on her feet, but is making a valiant effort to continue standing around nonetheless. “Someone forget to pay the bill?”

Mid-Nite merely raises an eyebrow at her. “I wasn’t aware you were now League-certified,” he says. “Batman sent me up. Gotham hospital is a bit busy at the moment, and apparently I’m not allowed to stitch myself anymore.” She actually rolls her eyes at this. “But hey, if you’re busy, you can just hand over a first-aid kit or whatever. I’m fine, really.”

“You’re fine?”

“Just a flesh wound.”

Mid-Nite looks her over as best he can through his infrared lenses. He can’t take in color that well, and her black costume makes it hard to see the details of her, but he can definitely see the way her silhouette is rocking in gentle circles. He steps forward, levels his gaze right into her own, then gently pushes her on the shoulder.

She falls right onto her ass with an “OW!”

“You’re right,” he decides. “You’re absolutely fine. You can go home now.”

She sighs heavily and concedes, “Fine. You can see to me. If you’re going to insist.”

Jane is immediately at Batwoman’s side and helping her up again and over to a table. Jane uses the battle fork to prod at the step-control that lowers the exam table so it can be gotten on more easily. Batwoman looks down at the fork, then up at Jane, and says, “Where did you even get that stupid fucking weapon?”
Jane bristles a little and says, “At the end of the world.”

Batwoman seems to consider this, then shrugs and says, “Fair enough.”

They’re interrupted by the crackle of the intercom system. “Alert to all Watchtower personnel, this is Oracle. It seems that the entire Oracle network has just been fried by Captor’s petulant babyfit. Communications will be back up in maybe half an hour, but other systems will take much longer. For now, the transporters are down in order to avoid any unfortunate malfunctions until they’re given a full examination. Because it was not part of the Oracle network, the telecom satellite is still working, so you can still use your phones. Turn off data usage, though; the system can’t handle too much right now.

“If you’ve got the skills to help and are currently available, please make your way to the primary network center. Everyone else keep doing whatever you were doing until the system has restored.”

Jane groans and carefully deposits Batwoman on the table before pulling out her phone. “Sir, I’d like to message Dirk and Roxy to find out what the hell is going on?” she says, but she’s already stepping away because she knows she’ll be granted permission anyway.

Mid-Nite makes a noise of assent as he moves the examination table back up to start looking over Batwoman. Jane knows Oracle literally just said not to use data, but she’s fairly certain that chat-clients use less than phone calls do.

-- tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering gutsyGumshoe [GG] --

TG: omgosh janey are you at watchtower rn???
GG: Oh good! I was about to message you and Dirk.
GG: Yes, I’m at the Watchtower’s medical bay, and there seems to have been a recent incident between Oracle and Sollux, which is why I got on pesterChum to ask:
GG: WHAT THE HELL DID HE DO???
TG: i dont know i dont know!!!!
TG: booster gold has aradia's phone for some reason and has been messagin around like crazy tryin to figure out where we all are
TG: aradia blasted off into space apparently and jade went after her and aradia made her disappear dave says probably forward in time because if it was backward there would have just been double jades for a while unless she sent her to like the dinosaur age but hes pretty sure thats not it
GG: Why is Aradia coming? Why would she send Jade away? Jade has more technical skills than Aradia does?
TG: janey i dont think shes comin to help!!!
TG: have you ever seen a massively pissed off troll before pre-shooshpap???
GG: Um…
GG: Does the Condesce count?
TG: in this case? YES
GG: Wait, really?
TG: WARN THEM

Jane shoves her phone into her pocket and takes off running, forgetting even to tell Dr. Mid-Nite why or where she’s going. She runs to nearest flight shaft (faster than elevators and definitely faster than stairs even if you fly up the stairs), opens the door, and jumps in, letting herself drop to floor three before she catches herself and scrambles into the hallway.

She flies past confused League members and down to where she thinks the primary network center is, stopping, finally, in the doorway. She’s shocked at what she sees. She’d thought that Sollux had shut down the Oracle network, but it seems that he somehow destroyed it. Oracle and Green Lantern
(the one Jane had been told was called John Stewart) are currently cooling off the wreck with fire extinguishers while Zatanna flits about casting cooling spells on everything she can reach.

Green Lantern notices Jane first, and Oracle notices him noticing and turns to face Jane herself. She glowers and says icily, “Can I help you?”

“Well, Roxy said to tell you that Aradia is headed up here,” Jane says.

“Aradia Megido?” Oracle repeats. “Unless she’s going to pull my functioning system out of the timestream, I don’t see how… Wait, can she do that?”

“Um, I don’t think she’s coming to - ”

“INTRUDER ALERT INTRUDER ALERT HULL BREACH SECTOR 6D INTRUDER WITHIN WATCHTOWER ALERT ALERT”

“The fuck?” Oracle demands.

Green Lantern looks concerned. “6D is right next to us,” he says. “Zatanna can you - ”

He’s interrupted by a wave of red psionics emanating from the door at the other end of the network center and with it comes a wave of anguished screaming inside Jane’s head. She falls to her feet, crying out as she clutches her head, but it stops as suddenly as it had started, and the doors burst open. Standing there is Aradia Megido, looking every bit like the descriptions of her ancestor, tall and proud and hideously angry as she crackles with power. She explains herself by screaming, “I’M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU, BITCH!”

And from there it’s all a blur of motion and blood and angry screaming. Green Lantern heads her off before she can get to Oracle, but Aradia’s psionics tear off his ring and knock him across the room. Zatanna and Jane attempt to back him up, but Jane gets knocked to the ground by psionics and pinned there. Zatanna lasts a little longer, but Aradia doesn’t need spells to use her powers, and that gives her a lot of edge speed-wise. Soon, not only is Zatanna knocked aside, but the wave of terrible voices has returned.

This isn’t what I wanted.

Why couldn’t you save me?

So far from the earth… Are you running from us?

Oracle has very nearly gotten to the door, but Aradia uses her psionics to pull the wheelchair back to her, rubber tires groaning as they’re slid across the floor in the wrong direction. Aradia’s clawed hands grip each armrest as Oracle looks up with terrified confusion, holding a stun weapon ready, and Aradia screeches right into her face, “YOU THINK WE FOUGHT SO HARD, RAN SO FAR, JUST TO LET YOU TAKE HIM?! TURN HIM INTO ANOTHER CONDESCENDED TOOL?! HE’S NOT HER FUCKING ENGINE, AND HE’S NOT YOUR FUCKING COMPUTER! I WILL KILL YOU ALL BEFORE I EVER LET A SINGLE ONE OF YOU LAY YOUR HANDS ON - !”

And then Superman throws her into a wall. Aradia seems to crumple there, and the voices disappear again. Superman turns to Oracle with picture perfect concern. “Are you alright?” he asks.

“She just - I don’t - ” Oracle struggles, still in shock. “I… Give me a minute, okay?”

“All the time you need.” He turns again as Supergirl, Martian Manhunter, and Starfire land nearby.
“Maid of Time was threatening to kill Oracle. We need to get her subdued and contained, then…”

His words die off as he’s interrupted by metallic groaning. He has just enough time to turn to face the
new threat before Aradia throws an entire deck of servers into him.

Supergirl immediately throws herself into action, but then she just… stops. Frozen in place. The
same happens to Martian Manhunter, Zatanna, and Starfire when they try to jump into the fray. Jane
wants to help, but she know if she jumps into the fight without a plan, she’ll just get time-frozen too.
She looks across the room to Green Lantern, but he looks as lost and helpless as her.

Aradia turns back to Oracle, red psionics pulsing around her like a heartbeat. She sneers viciously,
growls, starts to speak.

And then Booster Gold tackles her to the floor out of seemingly nowhere.

“GET OFF ME!” she screeches, while he quickly scrambles around her to lock her in a hold from
behind so that it’ll be much more difficult to tear him off with a simple psionic blow. His response is,
“No! Shut up, and calm down!”

Jane is just as surprised as everyone else when Superman, Supergirl, Martian Manhunter, Zatanna,
and Starfire are suddenly dropped from their timelock. Aradia #2 quickly floats into view and greets
them with a smile and a wave. “Hi!” she says, just as dauntlessly cheerful as ever. “Sorry about this!
Simple misunderstanding. We’ll explain momentarily, and then she’ll leave to become me.”

“You tried to kill me!” Oracle objects. She gestures to Booster Gold, who is just barely restraining
Aradia #1. “Are currently trying to!”

Aradia #2 shrugs this off like it’s nothing. “Would you not, were one of your teammates threatened?”
she asks.

Oracle gapes at her. “What?” she demands. “I didn’t threaten anyone!”

“Calm Aradia, show her the fucking phone!” Booster yells at her. “Angry Aradia, stop trying to
break my spine!”

Aradia #2 starts to step forward toward Oracle, but Superman is immediately in front of her, pinning
her with a stern glower. She considers, then hands him the phone instead. He looks down at it.
Scrolls through the text. Baffled, he turns to Oracle. “What on earth did you say to Sollux Captor?”
he asks.

“Nothing rage-worthy!” she insists. “He told me some more information about what happened to the
rest of the trolls, and then I told him my idea of feeding his doom-voices into a databank in an
attempt to create a warning system.”

“Don’t you DARE!” Aradia #1 sobs, and it looks like she may have calmed down a little, as Booster
has released one of her arms so that he can pet her hair while he whispers reassurances and pleads for
her to power down. He also seems to have let her refold her wings to a more comfortable position.
There’s wine-red tears running down her face, and she’s emitting a distressed buzzing sound.

“I - ” Oracle gives them a baffled look, while Aradia #2 looks mildly embarrassed. “What, exactly,
did you think I was going to do? Carve his brain out? A simple interface would work fine. Half of us
have been hooked to similar systems before!”

Aradia #2 bristles and, for a second, Jane thinks the fight is going to start again, but then Booster
Gold bites out, “Radia, use your words.”
The portion of the room that knows him well is giving him the most utterly disbelieving looks, but Aradia #2 sighs, takes a deep breath and says, “Oracle, can we agree that you will never, ever consider applying any sort of technological interface—mechanical, biological, or otherwise—to Sollux?”

“... If that’s what he wants,” Oracle agrees hesitantly.

“I can assure you that it most definitely is,” says Aradia #2. “There is no timeline, no universe in which Sollux would consent to such a thing with anything remotely resembling enthusiasm.”

“Based on this,” Superman says, indicating Aradia’s phone, “he seems to think it might kill him?”

“I don’t care if it does or not!” Aradia #2 snaps. “It’s not going to happen! Ever! Or I really will - !”

“Aradia!” Booster warns again. She shoots him a look over her shoulder, and he shoots her a look back. They have a short glare-off, and then Aradia #2 huffs and looks away, deflating a little exactly like one might expect of a sulky teenager who wasn’t capable of ripping the Watchtower apart with her brain.

John Stewart recovers his ring from the floor, suits up as Green Lantern again, and dusts himself off more to compose himself than because of any actual dust (though there is plenty of that around now). “It seems to me,” he says carefully, “that what we have here is a severe cultural conflict of understanding. Please, Ms. Megido, would you mind explaining what it is about interfaces that is so offensive so that we can avoid this kind of misunderstanding in the future?”

Aradia #2 frowns and looks at the floor as she considers her answer. Aradia #1 has calmed enough for Booster Gold to release her from the wrestling hold into more of a hug. Finally, Aradia #2 says, “Sollux is the most powerful psionic in troll history, back when there was a troll history, since his genetic ancestor, Mituna Captor, who was known simply as The Psionic until he was captured and made helmsman of Her Imperious Condescension’s lead battleship, upon which he became known as The Helmsman, not that there was much personality left to identify by any name.” When she says that, Aradia #1 sobs loudly into Booster’s chest, which only confuses the collected audience more.

“He became the ship’s pilot?” asks Supergirl, not really understanding why that was such a big deal.

“He became the ship’s engine,” Aradia #2 corrects, and now Aradia #1’s anger has completely dissolved into anguish, her whole body shaking as she sobs into her new mentor’s chest.

Oracle swears under her breath and rubs her eyes exhaustedly. “Biological technology,” she realizes. “Your people used their own kind as... as interchangeable parts?”

“Those of us who could serve in such a role, yes,” says Aradia #2.

“Jesus shit, no offense, but I really hope you’re right that no more of you survived,” Oracle says before she can think better of it. The Kryptonians and Martian look horrified, and Superman objects with a chastising, “Oracle!”

But Aradia #2 just looks at her for a moment before her body language finally completely relaxes, and she laughs. “Yeah,” she says. “It’s not intrinsic, though, before you go worrying about the Matriorb. Beforus mostly wasn’t like that, from what I’ve heard. The Signless said we could be better. Karkat and Kanaya think we can be better.”

Starfire takes a half-step forward and asks, uncertainly, “Um, can I give you a hug? Would that be okay? Because you look like you need a hug....”
Aradia #2 looks surprised, but then she nods, and Starfire has her wrapped in her arms almost immediately, and Aradia #2 is laughing into her ribs because Starfire is so much taller, and it strikes Jane that the bundle of them is approximately 90% hair.

Booster Gold finally releases Aradia #1, turning her to face him. As she wipes her face with the back of her hand, he tells her, “Okay, you ready to go now? You need to tell Jade to go to Sollux, and then you need to find me and jump back just like you already have. Got it?”

Aradia #1 nods solemnly. Slowly, she collects herself from the floor, starts to turn toward the door, then stops and turns back to Oracle. “Um,” she says through sniffles. “I’m sorry I tried to kill you and wrecked your shit.”

Oracle’s smile is still a little uncertain, but it’s genuine nonetheless. “I accept your apology, and I’m sorry I caused you to think something so horrible,” she says.

Aradia #1 nods and again starts to turn away, but Jane quickly climbs back to her feet. “Actually!” she interrupts, and both Aradias as well as the heroes look to her like they’ve forgotten she was there. “If you want to make it up to her, I know of one thing that you can do, maybe?” The Aradias just look confused, but then Jane points to the absolute wreck of the primary network servers and system interfaces which had been blown up, extinguished/frozen, and then thrown into Superman.

Aradia #2 smiles broadly and laughs. “Oh, right! I almost forgot! Aradia, please help me restore this thing?”

“Oh,” says Aradia #1. “Yeah, sure!” And together they summon their Music Box Time Machines and start to play. Aradia #1 plays an unfamiliar but beautiful song that is somehow recognizably going backward and the network machinery starts reversing its damage. Meanwhile, Aradia #2 starts playing the same song even more mysteriously sideways, and and the machinery starts blurring, buzzing, and flashing. Then, suddenly, a flash of Aradia #1’s psionics send the damaged machinery off to the side, and Aradia #2 tears the undamaged machinery out of whatever timeline it came from and into this one, back into place where the other had been. They then both play forward, and the damaged machinery rusts and corrodes and splinters until all that’s left is dust.

Oracle blinks in shock. “Um… Okay. That’s… thanks?” she says. She points to the pile of dust. “But, in powder form, the components of computer machinery are extremely toxic to humans.”

“Oh,” say the Aradias, looking embarrassed. “Well, I guess we could - ”

“No, no, that’s fine,” Jane interrupts quickly. She turns to Aradia #1 and say, “Why don’t you go complete the timeline like Mr. Gold said?”

Booster snickers at that, still sitting on his ass on the floor. “Mr. Gold. I like that. Everyone can call me Mr. Gold now.”

“No,” says Green Lantern. “Party pooper.”

As Aradia #1 flies back the way she came, Jane turns to Aradia #2 and says, “And you can, um…”

“Go with Booster, Oracle, Superman, and I to debriefing,” says Green Lantern. “Supergirl, Martian Manhunter, I’d appreciate if you could help get this cleaned up. Starfire, please go back to earth to ensure all our newcomers are safe and calm.”

“Will do!” Starfire says, jetting away in a flash.
Green Lantern turns to Jane. “Ms. Crocker, you are probably going to be needed in medical bay,” he reminds her. Jane nods and quickly scurries off. She hopes Dr. Mid-Nite doesn’t resent her sudden disappearance.
When Jane gets back to the medical bay, Dr. Mid-Nite is gone, but Batwoman is lying on her back on one of the tables, staring up at the ceiling tiles with her hands folded under her head. “You’re still here?” Jane asks.

“Yep,” says Batwoman. “Just waiting for my release.”

Jane goes to check Batwoman’s chart to see if there’s anything else needed, but her chart isn’t there. Jane looks around, but it doesn’t seem to be anywhere sensible. Surely, Dr. Mid-Nite had too much experience for such a silly mistake?

“So, I’m Batwoman,” says Batwoman. “And you are…?”

“Hm?” Jane looks up from the desk where she’s trying to search for the chart without actually disturbing any of Dr. Mid-Nite’s work. Batwoman is watching her with a gaze that is completely unreadable due to a mask that hides everything but the mouth, but, as far as Jane can tell, being creepy and stoic and unreadable comes with the territory of affixing “bat” to your superhero name.

“Oh, um, I’m Jane Crocker.”

“Crocker, huh? Any relation to Betty?”

“Oh! Oh, phooey,” Jane cries after accidentally dropping the stack files she had so carefully lifted from the desk to see if the clipboard beneath was the one she was looking for. They cascaded across the desk and down onto the floor, paperwork spilling out and mixing together along the way.

“Uuuugh, Mid-Nite is going to kill me.” She crouches down to correct the mess, but stops when a hand lands on her shoulder.

Batwoman is standing over her. “Hey, trust me, it’s better if you leave it,” she says. “If you fix all the files, it’s going to take him forever to figure out any mistakes you might make. Best to let him do it right the first time.”

“I guess…” Jane admits, chewing on her lip as she regards the spilled files. “It just feels so rude…”

“Hm,” says Batwoman, and Jane isn’t quite sure if that’s a thinking noise or an amusement noise. She turns and lifts herself carefully back onto the table. She regards Jane for a moment, then shrugs and says, “Talk to me, then. Keep me from getting bored. Then you can use me as an excuse for why you didn’t clean up.”

“I guess…”

“So you’re with all the kids that showed up at random and blackmailed Batman, yeah?”

Jane stiffens and shoots her a suspicious look. “I suppose you’re holding it against me?”

“Me?” says Batwoman, and her lips curve in a decidedly Dirk-like way. “I think it’s hilarious.”

Jane scowls disapprovingly. “It’s not,” she says. “It’s not anything. We just did what we thought was best at the time for the resources we needed with the resources we had.”

“Yeah, you’ve had it a mysterious kind of rough, huh?” Batwoman asks, unphased, and Jane flinches again. “But I get it. You don’t want to talk about that. Can I ask, though, what your title is?”
“My what?” asks Jane.

“There’s a hero title system, right?” says Batwoman, and Jane kind of wonders where she got that from, but it doesn’t really matter. A promise to not keep digging doesn’t mean that the World’s Greatest Detective isn’t carefully cataloguing absolutely everything that’s mentioned by their own free will. “You guys all showed up here with your own powers, your own costumes, and your own titles which revolve around your powers. Whatever happened in your mysterious before, you’ve done some heroing.”

“Not really,” says Jane. “I mean… Not the same kind. I’m Maid of Life.”

Batwoman blinks, apparently actually surprised. “Like Ram Horns is Maid of Time?” she asks.

Jane nods. “Yes. We have the same class but different aspects.”

“So what does it mean?” asks Batwoman. “Maid of Life?”

Jane shrugs. “I clean away death, I suppose,” she says. “Similar to how Aradia cleans away idiosyncrasies. Though she also seems to be able to create idiosyncrasies, so Dave’s suggested it’s a pun. That Aradia is *made* of time. That doesn’t feel like the right description for me, though.”

Batwoman seems interested in this revelation and pushes, “You don’t know what your titles mean?”

Again, Jane shrugs. “In some cases, it’s really clear. In others, not so much. Seer of Light? Pretty clear. Sylph of Space? Not so much.”

“But you think ‘maid’ can mean something different for Aradia than it does for you?” asks Batwoman.

“There’s fourteen classes and twelve aspects, with a resultant one hundred and sixty-eight possible hero titles,” says Jane. “Which sounds like a lot until you realize that this system is intended to describe all possible abilities within all possible realms. Once you realize that, it becomes pretty darn clear that there’s a certain amount of flexibility to the definitions.”

“Hm,” Batwoman says again. “That explains a lot, actually. Especially regarding how insultingly over-simplistic the whole thing is.”

Jane is surprised by the statement. “How - ? What?”

“I don’t mean to belittle your life thing,” Batwoman says quickly. “Healers have a much more important role than most people give them credit for. Besides, it would be stupid to insult the man who just sewed me back together. But Dr. Mid-Nite is much more than a general healer; he’s an amazingly talented surgeon who often gets called in to hospitals across the country to help with special cases, and he has a genius-level intellect, and he’s a falconer for some damn reason, and he’s a pretty good martial artist. Not to mention that he does this all while being mostly blind. I’m willing to bet they don’t tell you how to grope your way through a delicate surgery in medical school.

“Anyone who thinks he’s just a doctor in a costume because the majority of his patients are also in costume is vastly underestimating him. And it is very, very obvious that you are more than a girl in a uniform come to straighten up life’s house. You’re clever and deductive. You’re sneaky as hell. You’re enthusiastic, a fast learner, keep your head in stressful situations, and are generally unshakable, and yet when I asked you about a supposedly fictional character, you jumped. And, to be quite honest, Ms. Crocker, I think you’re wasted in this room.”

Before blushing, confused, and mildly alarmed Jane can figure out what to say to all this, the medical
bay doors hiss open again, and Dr. Mid-Nite steps inside. He stops only a few steps in and raises an eyebrow. “Batwoman,” he says, “didn’t I dismiss you?”

Batwoman grins her Dirk-grin again and slides off the table onto her feet. “Must’ve misheard,” she says as she heads for the door. “Thanks for the patch-up, Doc.”

“Batman never sent you up here, did he?” Jane calls after her, a little bit angry and a little bit impressed.

Batwoman grins back over her shoulder. “See what I meant?” she says. “Clever.” And then she disappears into the hall.

“Jane, what happened to my desk?”

“Is it actually being suggested that we simply ignore an earnest attempt at murder and destruction because said destructive murderer said ‘Oops! Sorry!’?” the Question drawls, sitting back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest. No one had actually invited him to this meeting, but that had never stopped him before.

“It was an attempt on me,” says Oracle, “and I find the situation completely understandable now that I know her motivation for her actions.”

“That’s nice, but your personal feelings aren’t actually relevant,” says the Question.

If they weren’t sitting on opposite sides of a very long table, Oracle would have punched him. “Excuse me?” she snarls.

“You get to decide whether punitive action is taken because the crime was against you,” the Question clarifies. “You have decided not to. Great. Done. What should be argued now is preventative action, and it seems to me that some of you are getting the two confused. Are you truly under the belief that this is the last time that she’ll be confused? That if someone actually does threaten her or her friends in the future, that she won’t engage in the same behavior? That any and all future vengeance will definitely be wrought solely against Oracle, and therefore only Oracle’s input matters?”

“Actually, no, I don’t think we are done discussing punitive action,” says Hawkman. “I’m not. She committed a crime here. Against us, her supposed allies. Why are we writing that off just because Oracle decided it’s understandable, when we handed over the Scourge Sisters for much less?”

“How exactly, in your mind, is it ‘much less’ criminal to decide that you are the judge, jury, and executioner of a single man than to try to prevent your best friend from being turned into a living, suffering machine component?” asks Green Arrow.

Instead of answering, Hawkman rolls his eyes and waves him off. “My point is that these aren’t civil charges, they’re criminal ones. The Scourge Sisters were handed over to law enforcement for breaking laws, and the Maid of Time should be, too.”

“First of all, there are exceptions within the law for self-defense,” says Superman.

“Then they can argue that with the court,” Hawkman counters.

“Secondly, these are children,” Superman snaps. He looks around at the gathered heroes. “Have we all forgotten that? That these are children who turned up so suddenly on this planet that they had to blackmail Batman for resources?”
“We don’t know that they’re children,” the Question points out. “They’re aliens. They’re aliens that absolutely none of us know anything about. We don’t even have any real evidence to suggest that the matriorb’s function is what they say it is. For all we know, everything so far has been an elaborate act to gain our trust and measure our response to various attacks.”

“No one cares about your conspiracy theories, Question,” Guy Gardner growls.

“Actually,” Hal Jordan cuts in, “that is an angle we need to discuss. John and I have been talking. It is extremely concerning on its own that an unknown species showed up to earth under what appears to have been violent circumstances and has not made an overwhelming effort to keep itself clear of future violence. But add onto that the constant references to a horrifically violent, oppressively abusive, and massively invasive race that they claim to now be suddenly non-existent but refuse to offer any evidence that would allow us to actually investigate that claim.”

“We would like to take them to Oa for further investigation,” says John Stewart. “Ideally, we would take all seven trolls temporarily for a thorough investigation. If the story really does check out, they can return here, but if they’re a threat, then I, for one, would like to know it before the first wave shows up.”

Guy Gardner snorts derisively at his partners. “And what, exactly, are you expecting the Big Heads to be able to do about it?” he demands.

“Actually, I think that that’s the most reasonable suggestion that’s been made so far,” says Question.

“Aside from the fact that it’s still ignoring that three of them have collectively committed two crimes on earth already,” grumbles Hawkman, but aside from a few glares, he largely goes ignored.

Instead, Superman argues, “So we’re just going to punish kids for existing now?”

“They’ve proven themselves intrinsically dangerous,” says Hal.

“So have you!” Superman counters. “Half the people in this room are intrinsically dangerous metahumans or extraterrestrials! There are even more outside! But we are heroes because we decided not to let that define us, and these kids still have that chance. They are all, even the Scourge Sisters, making an honest effort to set things right. The Maid of Time did what she did because she thought we had gone villainous, not because she herself had decided to do such.”

“They seem to have an incredible misunderstanding of what villainy actually is,” says John. “Have you seen the notes Pyrope made in her law books?”

“All fine points,” says Batman. “But again, they are children.”

“You don’t know that,” Question counters yet again.

“And you don’t know that they aren’t,” Batman counters right back. “So until any of you come up with evidence otherwise, let’s stop acting on presumptions on the mystery instead of the evidence that we actually do have in front of us.

“They are children. Children that have made egregious mistakes, but mistakes that are comparable to those of current League members, even including people in this very room. If we want them to be different, to choose a better path, then it is our jobs as not only more experienced heroes but as the only adults in their lives aside from Mr. Crocker to both set the example for them and to offer them the alternative. If we assert ourselves as dominating over them, our wills to be followed simply because we say so, these scared and abandoned children will simply close rank and become more violent. Compassionate and understanding leadership is the only way we’re going to get them to
open up and to soften.”

“That said,” says Wonder Woman, giving Batman a sharp look, “are you really going to continue to stand by your decision to have the Maid of Time mentored by ….Booster? Who said he only wanted to take on the role because she’s ‘hilarious’?”

“You know,” says Martian Manhunter before Batman can answer, “yesterday, I was very much with you on the terribleness of that decision, Diana. But having seen what I’ve seen today, I have to think that Batman has perhaps seen in Booster Gold a quality the rest of us have missed, that, perhaps, Booster himself did not previously notice. Booster Gold is not a metahuman, and even with his incredible suit, he does not actually compare to the likes of the Kryptonians, much less the combined force we used to fight Aradia. And yet it was he alone who was able to grapple with her and to talk her down. It was he who eased her anger back into grief and, eventually, calm. As the member of this room with the most experience in heroic mentorship of traumatized and troubled youths, I believe perhaps we should begin taking Batman’s advice more seriously.”

“Makes me wonder why it’s Nightwing that took on Strider instead of you,” Hawkman says, shooting Batman a suspicious look across the table.

Batman only smirks back at him. “Because if I had become a mentor of any of these children, I would not have the supposed impartiality that allows me to sit in on these discussions and tell you that you’re an idiot,” he says.
“Sir, there appears to be some kind of conflict occurring inside!” Skeets exclaims worriedly as he buzzes ahead to Aradia’s door.

Booster Gold lands next to the little robot, carefully balancing three extra large pizzas in one hand. “Yeah, Skeets, I’m pretty sure they can tell four floors down,” he says, rolling his eyes. *Teenagers.* He knocks on the door.

There’s a brief pause, then he hears the specific tones of Aradia and Dave rather than the clashing noises of Dave, the two trolls that could be clicking or speaking English at any given moment, and the Mayor who only clicks. Booster whispers to Skeets, “Hey, what did Dave just say?”

“I believe he told Aradia ‘Of course, it’s the old creeper. Who the hell else bothers us?’”

Before Booster can react, the door has swung open, and Aradia is grinning up at him. “Hi, Booster! What’s tonight’s mission?”

“I don’t know why you won’t just replace it,” Karkat is hissing to Dave in the background. He probably thinks he’s being quiet, poor child.

Dave, surprisingly, is on his hands and knees in soaked jeans and yellow dishwashing gloves, scrubbing angrily at the carpet. “Do y’ have any fucking clue how expensive carpet is?” he demands angrily. “I’d think y’ would by now, considerin’ this is our fiftieth fuckin’ argument about it. Not t’ mention the landlord will prob’ly raise our rent over it if he finds out.”

“Our schedule is actually clear, Ms. Megido!” Skeets chirps as he flies ahead inside and whirls around Aradia’s head to her delighted giggles. “Booster thought it would be a good idea to make a social call. Get to know you and your friends better.”

Behind Aradia and Skeets, Karkat is emphatically gesturing “no” and “go away” and “murder.” Booster considers but, well, he’s never been accused of having an abundance of good sense. Instead, he steps inside and closes the door behind him, as Karkat throws up his hands in frustration and appears to make a silent prayer to some higher power. “So, uh…” That is blood, Booster realizes belatedly. Dave is scrubbing a very, very large spot of blood out of the carpet. Or trying to. Booster clears his throat, forces a smile and says, “Thought you all could use some food.”

“No, we don’t eat. We’re motherfucking automatons. Literally. Mother-fucking is our job. Now that you’ve discovered our secrets, we’ll have to kill you. Hopefully, on the goddamn tile.” The words are joking, but Dave sounds like he’s one wrong word from strangling someone. Everyone in the room bleeds red, with Aradia being just a bit darker than the others, so there’s no telling for sure where the damned spot Dave is trying to out came from. Especially since no one seems to be sporting any heinous injuries, though, from what Booster’s seen (and will never, ever forget, no matter how hard he tries), there’s honestly no telling with trolls.

Aradia plucks the pizza boxes out of his hands and makes for the kitchenette. “Did you order the - ?”

“All meats with no cheese, all vegetables with no cheese, and cheese with pepperoni and jalapeños,” Booster recites dutifully as he follows after her. He hasn’t actually been inside the apartment yet;
Aradia tends to either meet him on the roof when he tells her that there’s a mission, or suddenly appear next to him to tell him that there will be a mission. On the times he has come to the door, Dave has been increasingly antagonistic. He notes that there’s only two bedrooms. He’s already been told that the Mayor likes to hold up in a cupboard, but that still means someone is bunking up and that had better involve actual bunkbeds, and no, it is not relevant what he was like at their age.

Booster doesn’t notice that Dave has stiffened and stopped scrubbing until he raises up to turn around and glare at them. “Why does Gold Bond know our usual order?” he demands.

“Because he usually buys it,” Aradia says, and Booster had genuinely thought that was a known thing. Why wouldn’t it be a known thing? Aradia’s already tearing into her meatza like she doesn’t think there’s a reason for it to be an issue either, and the Mayor is skittering up over the counter to inspect the wares, but Karkat is looking fretfully back and forth between Dave and Booster while Dave is so tense that Booster can see the outlines of his muscles.

“Aradia, I gave y’ my card,” Dave says with forced patience.

“Yeah, but I didn’t know how to use it. First time I went, I was interrupted by a mission, so when I got back, I just asked Booster how to use it, and he said he’d pay!” Aradia is now on her second piece. Karkat won’t get any if he doesn’t hurry.

Booster raises his hands in a placating gesture. “Hey, it’s cool. I’ve got plenty of -”

“I doubt that,” Dave snaps. “Yer a drunk with a gamblin’ problem who relies entirely on fickle sponsorship spots. I prob’ly made more money than you that one time I sold people actual pieces of shit, because, hey, takes almost no investment to produce and yet has infinitely more value than you.”

“Dave!” Karkat chastises, looking surprised. Huh, Dave’s shadow doesn’t know what Dave’s issue is, either? “What the fuck has climbed up your ass?”

“Besides you?” Dave asks, turning back to the bloodstained carpet, and Karkat’s ashen skin turns bright, bright red. Why he thinks he can hide his blood color is beyond - Oh, hey, they’re probably the ones shacking up. Booster isn’t sure if that’s an issue or not, but probably no one will get pregnant.

Maybe.

He should ask Aradia later…

“I’m not a drunk,” Booster says at last because it’s bothering him, and he’s not sure what else to say to an outburst like that. “I’ve been drunk, but I’m not a drunk.” Aradia is on her fourth slice. Jesus, nothing bothers this girl does it?

Dave just snorts at him. “There’s not really a dif’rence, Buster.”

“Yes, there is,” Booster argues, and Skeets chimes in that he could tabulate the statistics of Booster’s drunken mistakes against those of known alcoholics. (Dave turns Skeets down on that offer.) “You’re sixteen, supposedly, and shacked up with your boyfriend. You telling me you have yet to get drunk with your friends?” Actually… they’re all 16 or alien-16. How were they able to legally sign a lease agreement? Did the Mayor sign? How old is he?

“Yep,” says Dave. “Also, I’m not really sure who you think I’m gonna be getting shitfaced with when these assholes are intoxicated by refined sugar.”
“Wait, what?” Booster demands. He turns and glares at Aradia. “I have seen you buy bags of candy!”

Aradia just giggles wickedly. “I love earth,” she says with an undercurrent of self-satisfied clicking. “Dave, it’s been two weeks since we buried you, and you have scrubbed for several hours of every day. That stain isn’t coming out, so come eat your pizza.”

“What?” Booster demands.

Karkat ignores the sugar and booze tangent to pull on Dave’s shoulder. “Dave, come on,” he says quietly. “She’s right. You need to eat. We can just put a rug on it or something. Hell, we’ll dye the whole thing red if it helps. Come on.”

Dave shakes Karkat off with a grunt but stands up. “Whatever,” he says, pulling off his gloves and heading into the hall. “I’m gonna take a shower.” A moment later the door slams.

“What’s his - ?” Booster starts, but Karkat holds a hand up and shakes his head.

After a couple minutes, they finally hear the water run, and Karkat lowers his hand. “Sorry, but the walls are shitty,” he explains. “And the last thing we need is him throwing a bigger fit. Aradia, do you think you can erode the blood away?”

She shakes her head. “My abilities aren’t that refined,” she tells him. “I’d erode the carpet, too, and probably the floor. I still have his card. How fast do you think we can replace the carpet?”

“If you’re lucky, you can get it done in a few days,” says Skeets. “But in my experience, it takes the better part of a week.”

Aradia, Karkat, and the Mayor all three turn to look at Booster. “What? I’m a hero! Fights happen!” he objects. “Point is, you’re not going to get it done before he gets out of the shower. Besides, that’s not how money works. If he’s worried about the expense, I’m guessing he knows he can’t afford it. And if this is how he reacts to me buying pizza, then I can’t help either.”

“I dunno. He does take really long showers,” Aradia says. “We’ve had to use the bathroom at Starbucks quite a few times!”

Karkat rolls his eyes. “None of that was about - ” He cuts himself off, then gives Booster an appraising look, followed by a scowl. “Okay, some of it is about you. But if you’d stop trying to recruit him, he’d relax a lot.”

“What? I’m not trying to - ”

Karkat begins listing on his fingers, starting with “You ask questions about him.”

“Everyone is curious about the lot of you!”

Second finger. “You hang around with Aradia on the roof long after your missions have completed.”

“She’s my mentee,” Booster objects. “I’m not just gonna pick her up and dump her off!”

Third finger. “This isn’t the first time you’ve tried to get into the apartment. It’s just the first time you’ve succeeded, due to an advance plan and Dave’s distraction.”

“I’m not a burglar!” Booster objects. “Is it a crime to be friendly?”

“I have checked all the legal records from this time period, and I can assure you that it is not, sir!”
Skeets butts in. “However, within the cultural records, it does seem to be considered both irregular and inappropriate for a human man of your approximate age to be friendly with a human girl of her approximate age.”

“SKEETS!” Booster barks out in objection, and he’s not sure whether he wants to laugh or scream. This argument has gone way out of hand and honestly has no reason to exist in the first place! All he wanted -

Fourth finger. “You are obviously a time traveler,” says Karkat. “You may play the buffoon using advanced technology to reap his glory from peasants, but only a small percentage of missions you’ve called Aradia away on have appeared on television. That you largely do yourself.”

“Well, time is her -”

“But why the hell would someone choose to mentor her that was simply being taken for a ride by her powers? Why would she agree?” Karkat’s waving his arms and raising his voice now, and it’s only a matter of time before the neighbors hear. “No, you’ve definitely gained more experience than you admit to and are continuing to do so.”

“Fine! Jesus! Be quiet!” Booster hisses at him. “Fine, yes, I want to keep an eye on Aradia because of her time powers, and mentoring her makes that easier, and you can tell by her face right now that she already knew that and was fine. I need to keep an eye on Dave, too, I’m the only one who can -”

“Do you not yet understand what happens when you ask either of them to change things?!” Karkat demands angrily, gesturing to the bloodstain.

“Can I finish?” Booster demands. “Trust me, one dead Aradia is more than enough for me to learn that lesson, no matter how okay they are with it. What I’m saying is -”

“They’re not okay with it!” Karkat shouts. “Believe it or not, Aradia and Dave are not interchangeable. Designating yourself her new lusus doesn’t make you his!”

“I’m not trying to be anyone’s lusus!” Booster objects. “I just want to keep an eye out for -!”

“SIR!” Skeets interrupts, and Booster and Karkat just barely dodge an empty pizza box thrown at their heads. They turn to the source to see the Mayor crouched on the counter and chittering emphatically next to Aradia, who has passed out with her head resting next to the pizza boxes.

“She slept through all that?” Karkat asks, incredulous, but Booster is already at her side, checking her pulse and breath the way he had made her teach him how.

“Skeets, how long has she been out?” he demands.

“Four minutes, thirty-two seconds, Sir!” Skeets informs him. “She’s responding when the Mayor shakes her, but quickly goes back to sleep. Her vitals are slow, but fine. I detect no dietary distress, aside from the sheer amount she consumed.”

“Amount?” says Karkat. He glances at the empty pizza box. “Did she eat all of that?”

“Yes, she did!” Skeets chirps.

Karkat groans and runs a hand down his face. “Okay, give me a second,” he grumbles, wandering off to the hallway.
“What? Vantas, do you know what this is?” Booster demands. “Hey!”

Karkat doesn’t respond, but suddenly the sounds of the shower are a lot louder as Karkat has apparently opened the door to talk to Dave. “Dave, weird question, but do you know how old Aradia is?” This is met my confused mumbles. “No, she can’t. I’ll explain when you get out. Just tell me if you know for sure or can tell. Like, with time powers.” More mumbling. “Shit. … No, it’s fine. Just annoying. Let me know when you’re out.”

Karkat closes the door again and returns to the kitchenette. “She’s supposed to be almost seven, the youngest of us because of how long she was dead. But, according to Dave, she’s actually a little over eight because of spending so much time time-traveling and in dream bubbles,” he tells them.

“What the hell does that mean?” Booster demands. His hand tightens on Aradia’s shoulder, and she sleepily turns toward him, mumbles some sort of alien nonsense, and goes back to sleep.

“Seconded,” says Dave, who has emerged from the hallway in his jeans again but sopping wet.

“Dave, why the bulge-rotting shit are you doing dripping everywhere?!” Karkat demands.

Dave scowls at him. “Seriously, dude? ‘Let me interrupt y’r shower t’ ask y’ weird questions an’ tell y’ not to worry ‘bout it’? Yeah, I’m totally just gonna not worry an’ stay in there for another half hour.” He gestures to Aradia. “What’s going on with Megido?”

“It means that she’s preparing to metamorphosize,” says Karkat. “She’ll eat a lot, sleep a lot, and gradually slow down until she collapses in a corner somewhere and starts developing a shell.”


Karkat shrugs. “A taller, stronger, more powerful Aradia,” he says. “It really isn’t a big deal, but you shouldn’t take her on missions anymore. She’ll be more and more lethargic with each day.”

Dave gives Aradia a wary glance. “So she’s not like… gonna turn into Damara or nothin’, right?”

“What’s a damara?” Booster presses somewhat urgently.

But Karkat just snorts. “What? No. It’s a physical maturation, not a complete psychological upheaval.”

Dave doesn’t look convinced. He chews his lip as he continues considering Aradia’s sleeping form.

Karkat’s amusement slowly fades from his face. “Dave?” he asks carefully.

Dave starts to speak, then glances toward Booster and promptly shuts up. He glances again toward Aradia, looking worried. “It’s… prob’ly nothin’,” he says.

“Dave,” Karkat insists, but Dave shakes his head.

“Not while he’s here,” Dave mumbles. And Booster has had it up to here playing nice with the brick wall that is Dave Fucking Strider.

“Sir, I can contact the Watchtower!” Skeets offers. “If I tell them all that Karkat just said, I’m sure they’ll let us bring Aradia in for an examination! Just to make sure.”

Booster runs a hand through his hair. There’s no one at Watchtower that knows more about this than the trolls do, and insisting on taking her away would probably just piss off Dave more. … And force him to admit what he thinks is up. “Yeah, Skeets, that is an excellent idea,” he says just a little bit
vindictively. “We can get to the nearest hub in about five minutes.”

Dave watches Booster with an absolute blank expression for a moment, and then he shrugs and turns, heading back to the hallway. “Honestly, I don’t know why y’all don’t just make that Jade’s job, she’s so eager to please ya.” He disappears into one of the rooms.

Absolutely none of this has gone the way Booster had planned. But hey, what else is new?

Chapter End Notes

Tagged some upcoming characters who either aren't spoilery or aren't THAT much of a surprise at this point. However, there's three more on their way in a few chapters who aren't being tagged because of the massive spoiler. First one to guess who they are gets an invisible prize worth nothing.
Guys, this took so long to edit. You have no idea. I am never writing a chat with so many characters again. Jesus.

Warning: Beware the totes serious Harry Potter spoiler in there.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] has opened a new memo on board STRANDED IN SHAMELESS SPANDEX LAND --

CG: ALRIGHT ASSHOLES LISTEN UP. I HAVE BEEN HERE IN THIS FORTRESS OF FUCKERY FOR THREE GODDAMN NIGHTS ANSWERING THE SAME FEW STUPID QUESTIONS OVER AND OVER.
CG: I HAVE THUS MADE SURE TO GATHER AS MANY HANDLES AS POSSIBLE SO I CAN TELL YOU IDIOTS ALL AT ONCE.
CG: FIRST OF ALL, THERE’S NO REASON TO ACTUALLY BE CONCERNED ABOUT ARADIA. SHE IS SUPPOSED TO SPEND MOST OF HER TIME SLEEPING AND EATING. IF SHE DIDN’T SLEEP THROUGH THIS PROCESS IT WOULD BE EXTREMELY PAINFUL, AND SHE NEEDS TO EAT HALF HER WEIGHT IN BONE AND MEAT TO MAKE THE CHANGES POSSIBLE.

-- gutsyGumshoe [GG] has joined the memo --

-- sapphicStalwart [SS] has joined the memo --

GG: Do you really have to use such coarse language with everyone?
CG: YES. YES, I DO.
SS: Which one is Aradia and what happened to her?
SS: Please tell me it wasn’t another murder.
CG: WHAT ABOUT WHAT I JUST SAID CAUSES YOU TO BELIEVE THAT ARADIA IS THE INSTIGATOR IN THIS MATTER?

-- acrobaticChanticleer [AC] has joined the memo --

SS: The part where she’s a troll.
AC: She’s the one with ram horn- Did you have to?? Really???
SS: What?
CG: WOW. NICE SPECIAL PROFILING, HANDLE I DON’T ACTUALLY REMEMBER INVITING.
GG: She’s Batwoman. I invited her because she’s my mentor, and you said to invite people who weren’t already invited.
GG: I agree that comment seems really unnecessary, though. :/
SS: Every single one of them has casually admitted to committing or attempting to commit murder except the one who hasn’t figured out the capslock key.
SS: It’s not special profiling. It’s noticing a trend among the specific group that has arrived here.

-- timaeusTestified [TT] has joined the memo --
TT: Sounds like something a special profiler would say.

-- tentacleTherapist [TT] has joined the memo --

TT: Keeping in mind that, despite the fact that Karkat seems to have been interviewed to the point of aneurism, it seems that some people are not up to date on the reason these inquiries are taking place to start with, please allow me to provide some background information on the matter. Once we have established the distribution of foundational knowledge on the circumstances, Karkat may be free to continue his tutorial from there.

-- curvedArrow [CA] has joined the memo --

CA: Holy shit that was a lot of words.
SS: If you’re having trouble with reading comprehension, you could always ask your kindergartener for help.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] has joined the memo --

TG: holy shit someone gave one of you a kid

-- tamaranianTerror [TT] has joined the memo --

TT: literally handed her over! and also: SHES ADORABLE!!!
CA: Hey can we maybe like NOT talk about family members over fucking pesterchum of all things?
TG: uh...
TT: D: im sorry! sometimes i still forget about the identity thing!
TT: …
TT: …
CA: What? Why the parade of dots?
GG: It, um, seems that maybe our baseline for information should be… further down? More… base?
TT: Below sea-level.
TG: welp if karkat wasnt having an aneurism before he is now
CG: I’M FINE. EVERYTHING IS FINE. THERE’S ONLY A 12 FONT COLORS TO PICK FROM ON TROLLIAN.

-- gardenGnostic [GG] has joined the memo --

GG: really? theres a whole colorwheel on pesterchum!
CG: NO. I WAS OBVIOUSLY LYING. THANKS FOR POINTING IT OUT AS ALWAYS.
TT: im sorry? what’s the issue with the colors??
CG: THERE IS NO ISSUE WITH THE COLORS.
TG: your font color is what they call tyrian
TG: theyre wrong as hell tyrian is ironically much redder but in context it makes sense to call it that
TG: the context being thats the color of fishqueen mcbatterbitch
TG: you type like an empress
TG: youre probably starfire which means you also look kinda like an empress and act like an empress
TG: you are the scary bitch queen it is you
TT: oh!
TT: princess actually :) 
CG: …
TT: Welp.
SS: I’m a bit lost?
SS: I would thank you for the helpful information, if that helpful information wasn’t surrounded by squiggles and dicks.
TG: a knight requires no thanks
CG: BECAUSE HE’LL NEVER FUCKING GET ANY.

-- gallowsCalibrator [FGC] has joined the memo 3 months from now --

FGC: 4LSO THOS3 4R3NT SQU1GGL3S! TH3Y 4R3 MOR3 D1CKS!!
CA: Oh my god you weren't kidding. I dont know if this is painful or hilarious. Do I even want to know why the blood chart is covered in dicks?
TG: tradition
CA: Fair enough!
CA: Next question: Is gallowsCalibrator the one that literally hanged a guy and if so how is she texting from the jail?
FGC: TROLL14N T3MP0R4L M3CH4N1CS! I’M CH4TT1NG FROM TH3 FUTUR3!
TT: Which I guess means we get that working in the future.
TG: also did you escape or argue your way out
FGC: D4V3, 1 W1LL H4V3 YOU KNOW TH4T 1 4M, 1N F4CT, TH3 GR34T3ST L3G1SL4C3R4TOR TO H4V3 3V3R L1V3D >:D
TG: based on what little i actually listened to about legislaceration that doesnt answer the question at all
FGC: >;D

-- sapphicStalwart [SS] has left the memo --

CG: *SIGH* JANE, CAN I TRUST YOU TO COPY/PASTE THE PERTINENT PARTS OF THIS CONVERSATION TO HER LATER?
GG: There are pertinent parts of this conversation?
CG: THERE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE!
TT: Yes, let us make a return to the actual intended subject matter, if we may. Firstly, would those reading who have not yet spoken please type something into the chat so they will be noted as having joined, and we shall be informed as to who is actually present? A role call, if you will. In fact, I think it would be helpful for reference if each of those present or joining mentioned which vigilante they are.

-- rollingThunder [RT] has joined the memo --

RT: Oracle.
CG: I THOUGHT YOUR HANDLE WAS “ORACLE”?
RT: Only when I’m hacking my way into a conversation. This is my actual pesterChum account.

-- snapesDead [SD] has joined the memo --

SD: Spoiler
TG: oh my god that is the greatest handle ever
SD: ikr

-- grimAuxiliatrix [GA] has joined the memo --

TG: also i need to see your face when you find out why that text color is hilarious someone please take pics when that happens
GA: This Is Kanaya The Sylph Of Space.
SD: Okay??

-- grayGhost [GG] has joined the memo --

GG: Batman. Batgirl and Robin are with me but do not have their own accounts.

-- bunsofSteel [BS] has joined the memo --

BS: Superman. Superboy and Supergirl say they’ll read the log later.

-- tipsyGnostalgic [TG] has joined the memo --

TG: it wuz woth loggin in just for that!
BS: ;)
TG: RoLal, btw! rogue of void / just rogue

-- golgothasTerror [GT] has joined the memo --

GT: Jake here!

-- greenArrow [GA] has joined the memo --

-- sonicBoom [SB] has joined the memo --

GA: I made this account because Black Canary said I had to. I hope you’re happy.
SB: Black Canary.
CG: I’M NEVER HAPPY.
GG: Wait, is everyone using overlapping colors? There’s not any new colors at all? Even though pesterChum offers near-infinite variation?
TT: So it would seem. I’m also noticing that repeat handle signatures are becoming an issue. I do hope no one’s colorblind, because that may be the only way to tell certain handles apart, even if it further confuses others.

-- apocalypseArisen [FAA] has joined the memo one year from now --

FAA: sollux read this memo but i believe at that point he was still refusing to enter memos where oracle was present
FAA: this is aradia by the way
RT: I SAID I WAS SORRY

-- brazzledBravery [BB] has joined the memo --

BB: holy crap its not gonna take you a year to get through this is it???
BB: Booster Gold btw ;)
FAA: no i just didnt notice the memo until now
FAA: ill be powering down for the next week or two, then it will take me another week after i enter the metamorphic coma to construct my shell, then it will take about a month to grow out of it

-- redRiding [RR] has joined the memo --

RR: what
CA: ^Red Hood. And Im Arsenal. And yes the “tyrian” TT is Starfire.
CA: Im guessing that nonsensical ramble of alienese is the reason we were all summoned to fucking pesterchum
CG: YES. BUT THIS ISN’T EVERYONE.
GG: actually, unless Vriska plans on joining us from the future, i think this is everyone who was invited and is not offline!

CG: SH3 1S V3RY BUSY H4RR4SS1NG JOHN 4ND W1LL R34D TH1S L4T3

GG: John and the Titans are busy right now. Sollux is abstaining. Batwoman left already. Calliope isn’t good with this many strangers all at once. Dr. Mid-Nite said he’d read the log later. Because we could only invite Leaguers we knew, the roster is composed entirely of mentors and ex-supervisors. Raven is the only one who hasn’t shown up?

TT: yeah technology isnt really her thing or socializing in large groups ill be sure to catch her up later :)

TT: Wait, who are Superman and Green Arrow mentoring?

GA: I’m not mentoring anyone. Black Canary brought me in.

TG: yr not?

GA: Roxy, Black Canary is your mentor. You ASKED for her.

GA: I’m just your occasional baby-sitter.

GA: Who sometimes teaches you stuff…

GA: Crap.

SB: LMFAO

CA: x2

TG: ;D

GT: And um superman is well my mentor?

BS: You can cancel the question mark on that. I am definitely your mentor. I called dibs. :)

TG: OMG REALLY?!!! IM SO EXCITE!!!

TT: I’m guessing that this is why you moved in with the Crockers in Metropolis when Jade took over Roxy’s room here?

TT: I thought you didn’t want to do the hero thing.

GT: Well uh sort of? I guess i kinda wanted to actually? I just well i didnt really think it was a good idea? But i talked to starfire about it and she convinced me to give it a shot.

TT: Jake, that’s great. I can’t think of a better match.

GT: … really?

TT: Yes? Obviously?

GG: Dirk, nothing about what is going on in your head is ever obvious.

TT: Ouch. Point taken.

TG: okay role call is done time to lay down the base info for the poor douches standing around with starbucks

TG: THAT WAS ONE TIME

TG: that was one time in which you happened to reenact the old as hell meme that i was actually refrancing

TG: what relly? damn now i wish ida done it on purpose

CA: Wait did you literally show up late with Starbucks?

RT: During the matriorb thing. It was glorious.

CG: ANYWAY

CG: DAVE, THIS IS THE ONE TIME THAT I AM GOING TO ASK YOU TO DO THAT THING WHERE YOU RAMBLE SO ENDLESSLY NO ONE CAN GET A WORD IN EDGewise.

GG: I thought Rose was going to explain?

TG: if we wanna be here all day

TT: It’s alright. I saw this coming.

TG: dude you dont have to be a god to see the fucking obvious that was so not worth bragging about

TG: okay baseline knowledge time

TG: karkat aradia terezi vriska kanaya sollux and gamzee are all space aliens of a species called trolls

TG: yes trolls thats not a weird translation thing

TG: even though trolls and humans look pretty similar we are mammals and they are bugs
TG: just in case there are still people who didn't get the mammal memo
TG: they were all hatched on a planet called alternia which doesn't exist anymore
TG: in fact due to various shenanigans it never fucking existed in the first place
GG: How did that happen?
TT: Shenanigans.
TG: insert jazz hands here
TG: okay point is
TG: back on planet fuckery everything was fucked
TG: they had a caste system based on blood color starting with burgundy at the bottom and dark fuschia at the top
TG: after two separate attempts to usurp the empress starting with the cult of the signless and ending with the summoners insurrection the empress made the caste system a lot more strict and removed the adults from the planet scattering them among her many many many invasion troops
TG: rust bloods are menial labor and rust bloods with significant psionic ability are culled because wouldn't want to give anyone ideas about equality
TG: bronze bloods are also menial labor but can strive for the swank as hell position of being first line army fodder
TG: gold bloods tend to have psionic ability and they're literally physically integrated into the spaceship systems with low-power psionics becoming like computers and stuff and high-power psionics becoming helmsmen and no-power psionics being culled
TG: your body is just left there hanging off the ships wiring until it dissolves entirely and is replaced by someone else
RT: …
RT: So I guess I need to send Sollux a new round of apologies.
CG: YEP.
FAA: yes you will and eventually it will work
TG: limebloods were culled thats it just culled no limebloods anymore not allowed
TG: not clear on why since none of the insurrectionists were limebloods
FAA: no one is sure because the records were also wiped there are various rumors from them being able to control lusii to them having more psionic power than could be controlled to there having been a third insurrection that she was more successful in hiding from history
TG: right anyway
TG: man am i really going to go up the whole list like this fuck that was a stupid idea
TG: olive = footsoldier, jade = stayed on planet to tend to the mothergrubs, teal = cops bountyhunters and killer lawyers, blue = soldiers and commanders, indigo = commanders, purple = creepy clown cultists who were made judge jury and executioner and were the highest authority aside from the empress herself, violet = lawmakers and commanders and the only direct servants for the empress, fuschia = the empress and the heiresses
TG: she got away with this bullshit because of her lusus uh wait
TG: okay so trolls dont have parents
TG: instead drones take literal cumbuckets over to a giant bug thats not even the same species as them who then eats it and poops out troll eggs
GG: DAVE!
TG: well they do
FGC: Y3P! ONC3 W3’R3 OF 4G3 W3’R3 3XP3CT3D TO H4V3 TWO CONCUP1SC3NT P4RTN3RS 4ND, FROM 34CH COUPL1NG, PROV1D3 S4V3D G3N3T14C M4T3R14L TO DRON3S WH3N TH3Y ARR1V3!
RR: this was not a mental image I needed
BB: dave, i’m normally all for being inappropriate as hell but we really do not need an alien sex talk. plz move along to the actually important parts
TG: yeah except you do
TG: first of all this is a HUGE part of their society because if you fail to fill your first set of buckets
or any other set you will be culled
TG: and culled means murdered just to be clear
TG: an effort to cleanse their species and planet of your bullshit
TG: alternia may not have ever existed anymore but that doesn’t cure the seven surviving trolls of all the baggage it sent with them
TG: the first buckets arrive after last molt so you’d sure as hell have your partners figured out by then
TG: that’s aradia btw
TG: she’s entering her last molt she’s the one that would be hit with the fuck or die law
TG: if alternia were still a thing she could be murdered for not having two fuckbuddies yet
TG: so think about that when you tell me this isn’t important and stfu
FAA: dave it okay its not actually that big of deal
FAA: if alternia still existed i would have many many more trolls to choose from for partners
FAA: and even if i hadn’t found legitimate concupiscent partners i could fill a bucket with any other troll who was also lacking partners
BB: oh god
FAA: romantic couples have more viable slurry but the drones only care that you’ve filled your buckets
BB: aradia STOP
FAA: …
FAA: im sorry am i somehow being culturally insensitive?
CG: NO, ARADIA, LITERALLY EVERYONE HAS MORE SHAME THAN YOU.
CG: BUT IN THIS CASE, IT’S FINE. THEY NEED TO KNOW. I’M NOT HAVING ANY MORE MISUNDERSTANDINGS LIKE HAPPENED WITH YOU AND SOLLUX AND ORACLE. OR WITH THE SCOURGE SISTERS AND SOCIETY IN GENERAL. BECAUSE TRUST ME, THEY’RE REALLY GEARING UP TO MISINTERPRET THE MOLTING PROCESS.
AC: You say that like we’re doing it on purpose.
CG: I SAY THAT LIKE IT IS A THING THAT IS LITERALLY HAPPENING RIGHT NOW. WOULD SOMEONE PLEASE COLLECT THIS FEATHERY ASSHOLE?!
BS: On it. Sorry.
GA: Well, it’s kind of hard not be on edge when you refuse to explain anything about yourselves.
CG: WHICH WE ARE TRYING TO DO RIGHT NOW, SO MAYBE YOU WANT TO SHUT UP AND LET US CONTINUE.
TT: That said, I would like to make a point of something I consider rather obvious but that it seems certain persons are continuing to fail to notice.
TT: The fact that the trolls are coming to you now, opening up to you now, sharing their most intimate details now, is to ensure their safety on a foreign planet that is their only refuge.
TT: They cannot go home. If they go to anywhere that is not earth, they will no longer have the advantage of already having built relationships with a few members of the local species and would be in much more danger than they are here.
TT: Yes, danger. I think many of you are approaching this problem from the angle of knowing that you are heroes, that you are symbols of safety on this planet. But you are symbols of safety to humans and other earthlings.
TT: To anyone else, you are completely unfamiliar, horrifyingly overpowered, and difficult to gage. You say that you are defenders of justice, but whose justice? What if you’re lying? Who will defend them if you target them, since this is a planet that, on the whole, loves most of you very dearly?
TT: You may sit there and think that you would never do such a thing, but they have absolutely no way of knowing that. You’re asking them to trust complete strangers simply because you said so. Their secrets are guarded for a reason.
TT: We may be powerful, but so are you, and there are many, many more of you. You are fearsome, and the trolls owe you nothing. What they give you is out of their genuine efforts to reach a mutual understanding.
BS: …
RR: *slow clap*
TT: that was lovely rose thank you
AC: Holy shit I can hear Robin ranting from here.
TT: Is that what that is?
GG: One moment.
GG: this batgirl
GG: i m too rite u becuz batman is lek
GG: um ¿saying many things at?
AC: lecturing?
GG: :) lecturing robbin
GG: he
GG: + i
GG: we want too say that u r rite roze
GG: we appolojize for not empethizing bettr
AC: apologize / empathizing
GG: :)
GG: u r rite that he + i + the justiss leeg shud hav made bettr effurts too undrstand troll side
CG: NIGHTWING, YOU DON’T HAVE TO CORRECT ALL OF THAT. TRUST ME, IT IS FAR FROM THE MOST EGREGIOUS TYPING QUIRK WE HAVE EVER READ.
GG: ¿what is typing quirk?
GA: It Is The Unique Manner In Which Each Of Us Types, Intended To Communicate Something Of Our Personality.
GA: For Example, I Choose My Words Carefully, And Karkat Yells A Lot.
CG: ALL THE BETTER FOR PENETRATING THICK SKULLS WITH.
RR: can I ask whats up with the Spanish question marks
GG: i like them
RR: alright then
AC: They act as clarifiers, like the emoji, so she can be extra sure she’s communicating well.
RR: literally no one asked you
TG: anyway
TG: so the whole point of talking about cumbuckets except for the fact that its just hilarious to talk about cumbuckets
BS: Please stop calling them that.
TG: is to explain lusii
TG: lususes
TG: plural number of lusus
BB: which is…?
TG: well the thing is trolls dont have parents thats not a thing
TG: like what are you going to do follow the drones to the grub caves and watch this giant bug eat everybodys genetic material and wait for it to poop out a maggot that looks vaguely like you?
TG: nah youre a gnowness space invader you got shit to do
TG: there are multiple mothergrubs but not anywhere near enough to balance out these hundreds of maggot babies and the jadebloods normally do not give a fuck
TG: like the one time a jadeblood gave a fuck the whole thing turned into jesus christ superstar with less singing
TG: jadebloods are there to tend to mothergrubs not babies is the point
TG: so instead little baby maggots are raised by wild fucking animals
TG: the animals on the planet are generally white but a lusus has been bred to have blood that matches one of the castes and to instinctively seek out a baby of that caste and protect it into adulthood
TG: karkat had a crab, terezi had a dragon egg because sure why not, maryam is jadeblood so her
lusus actually was a mothergrub, aradia had a ram
TG: with the high bloods is where shit gets crazy
TG: vriska had an enormous spider that ate trolls and because it was too big to get around much
vriska had to go kill those trolls and haul the corpses back to mom before mom got too testy and ate
her and went looking for a new servant/kid
TG: gamzee was a land troll with a sea lusus that mostly left him to his own devices so that turned
out super well
TG: and the empress and the heiresses all share the same lusus called glubglub
CG: GL’GOLYB
TG: whatever
TG: its like
TG: sigh
TG: okay someone else take over because i only know how to compare it to other things they dont
know or to hentai which im pretty sure is just gonna start another argument
TT: It is pretty hentai.
TG: right?
GA: Gl’golyb Was A Monster Of The Deep. A Horrorterror. It Lived In The Deepest Part Of Our
Ocean. It Was Said To Be Unimaginably Massive. Feferi, The Heiress Who Was Our Friend, Could
Not Tell Us How Large It Was. She Described It As A Large Mass Of Tentacles With One Beak.
GA: It Was Her Job To Keep It Fed And Looked After Because When It Became Irritated It Would
Start To Scream. This Scream Has A Deadly Effect On Trolls. It Is Called The Vast Glub.
GA: As The Volume Of The Glub Increases, The More Trolls Will Die. The Low Bloods Will Die
First And Then It Moves Its Way Up The Hemospectrum. The Only Trolls Immune Are The
Empress And The Heiress.
GA: This Is Why, As I Imagine Was Dave’s Point, That The Empress Is The Empress. Without Her,
We All Would Be Annihilated By Gl’golyb.
GA: We All *Were* Annihilated By Gl’golyb.
-- sapphicStalwart [SS] has joined the memo --

SS: So what? The empress just decided she’d had enough with your entire planet?
GA: No.
GA: It Was Not Her Fault, Really. Because An Heiress Had Been Born And Would Not Challenge
Her Position For Some Time, She Took It For Granted That Feferi Would Take Care Of It, And She
Moved To Expand The Empire Further.
TG: oh yeah thats another thing
TG: different blood colors have different lifespans
GA: Yes. Aradia Would Have Been First Among Us To Mature Anyway, With Exception Of
Maybe Karkat, Because She Has The Shortest Lifespan. Sollux Will Take Almost Twice As Long.
I, Even Longer. And So On Up To The Empress, Who Was Thought To Be Functionally Immortal.
SS: But you’re sure that she’s dead?
GA: Well, Roxy Slew Her, And Shortly Thereafter, That Timeline Collapsed Into Non-existance,
Taking Every Physical Form Left Within With It. So, Yes.
CG: WHICH BRINGS US BACK TO THE ENTIRE POINT OF THIS BULLSHIT.
CG: ARADIA’S MOLT.
CG: IT IS A COMPLETELY NATURAL PART OF THE TROLL LIFE PROCESS WHICH
YOU WILL NOT SEE AGAIN FOR SOME TIME, PROBABLY, BARRING INEVITABLE
FUCKERY.
CG: IT IS JUST AS SHE DESCRIBED EARLIER AND JUST AS I HAVE BEEN
REPEATING OVER AND OVER TO EVERYONE: SHE SPENDS LESS AND LESS TIME
AWAKE, AND ONLY THEN TO EAT. EVENTUALLY, SHE WILL STOP WAKING UP
AND START DEVELOPING A HARD PROTECTIVE SHELL. WITHIN THIS SHELL, SHE
WILL GROW INTO HER ADULT FORM VERY QUICKLY, EVENTUALLY BREAKING THE SHELL.
CG: WHEN SHE FIRST EMERGES, SHE WILL BE SENSITIVE TO LIGHT, TOUCH, AND GERMS, SO ACTUALLY KEEPING HER IN THE MEDICAL BAY PROBABLY IS A GOOD IDEA BECAUSE OUR APARTMENT IS DISGUSTING.
TG: hey
CG: DON’T PRETEND LIKE YOU DON’T KNOW.
FAA: im also going to be 6’5” with larger horns and territorial instincts
FAA: im told that warning you about this is the reason why everyone had the good sense not to crowd me immediately afterward
TG: glad to find out that turns out okay
FAA: yes i am fine
CG: UH, ARADIA?
CG: YOU’RE USING YOUR LIVING QUIRK, BUT YOU’RE KIND OF TALKING LIKE… YOU KNOW… HOW YOU USED TO TALK.
FAA: yes im afraid i lost my sense of humor in the molt
FAA: ;)
FAA: im just tired karkat ive been fighting all day
CG: OH. OKAY, COOL.
TT: Did you need something, Karkat?
CG: GODDAMMIT.
CG: I WAS GOING TO SAY SOMETHING EVENTUALLY, REALLY, I JUST
CG: HAVEN’T FIGURED OUT WHAT YET.
TT: Perhaps I can help. Do you yet know the subject matter of the topic you have yet to discern?
CG: DAVE.
TT: Ah. I can see why that subject may be difficult to glean a single topic from.
CG: HE’S JUST
CG: I MEAN IT’S NOT LIKE I DON’T UNDERSTAND HIM. I DO. YOU DON’T SPEND
THREE YEARS WITH SOMEONE AND NOT FIGURE OUT WHAT THEY’RE LIKE. IT’S
JUST THAT I DON’T… UNDERSTAND WHAT I’M UNDERSTANDING?
TT: It’s not surprising that more cultural differences have arisen now that we actually live in a society
very similar to our source culture and even further removed from your own.
CG: I GUESS THAT COULD BE IT, BUT I’M PRETTY SURE IT’S JUST A DAVE
PROBLEM.
TT: Hm. Perhaps it would be helpful if you told me what the Dave problem is.
CG: WELL, TO START WITH, HE FUCKING HATES BOOSTER GOLD. WHICH, YOU
KNOW, UNDERSTANDABLE. THE GUY IS A MASSIVE DOUCHE. HE’S PRETTY
CLEARLY OVERLY INTERESTED IN DAVE’S TIME POWERS, BUT HE HASN’T
ACTUALLY ATTEMPTED TO CONVINCE DAVE TO JOIN, AND HE DOES RIGHT BY
ARADIA, SO I DON’T GET WHY IT’S SO DIFFICULT FOR DAVE TO JUST IGNORE
HIM? HE CAN IGNORE VRISKA AND EVEN GAMZEE, BUT HE CAN’T IGNORE THIS
BULGEKNOT?
TT: Ah, I see. Might I posit that this is, in fact, a cultural difference in that you may not have the
cultural context by which to recognize that Booster Gold fits well into a genre of human being of
which Dave has bitter familiarity with?
CG: WHAT “GENRE” OF HUMAN BEING?
TT: The Dudebro.
CG: OKAY, YEAH, I’VE HEARD THAT PHRASE BEFORE. I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST
DAVE SHOVING WORDS TOGETHER.
TT: Sort of. “Dudebro” is, as you posited, a joining of the words “dude” and “bro,” but this is in
reflection of the needless insistence on hypermasculinity, often to a toxic degree, seen within the
individuals described by the phrase.
TT: The Dudebro is someone who rejects anything perceived as weakness as well as anything
perceived as feminine because of the perceived weakness of femininity. They also tend to treat
serious matters as a joke because caring about things is perceived as yet another weakness. Needless
violence to prove their masculinity and overreaction to any perceived threat to or doubt upon their masculinity are all common traits.

**CG:** BOOSTER GOLD REMINDS HIM OF HIS BRO.
**TT:** Without having actually witnessed any of their interactions, that is the only conclusion that jumps out at me.

**CG:** WHAT THE FUCK AM I SUPPOSED TO DO ABOUT THAT?
**TT:** Honestly, Karkat, I don’t think there’s anything you can do. At least not anything that would be a remotely good idea.

**TT:** If you talked to Booster Gold about it, Dave would be extremely insulted and upset that you had gone behind his back about his own emotional matters.

**TT:** Booster Gold cannot leave the situation without taking Aradia with him, which would be a bad idea because 1) Sollux has moved in next door specifically to be closer to his moirail and avoid another incident of miscommunication, and 2) Stealing one of Dave’s few friends from him isn’t going to make him any happier.

**TT:** You might convince Dave to hash things out with Booster Gold, but I don’t think that is likely to come to any definite resolution because Booster Gold is not the actual problem here.

**TT:** What Dave needs is a sense of closure regarding his relationship with his brother so that his psyche can finally begin to heal over those scars.

**CG:** WHICH IS IMPOSSIBLE BECAUSE BRO IS DEAD.
**TT:** Which is impossible because Bro is dead.

**CG:** FUCK.
**TT:** Indeed.

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

**TT:** hi dave! jade told me youre a photographer is that true?
**TG:** what have you got some kind of camera villain you need help with
**TT:** sorry babe i literally did not sign up for that
**TG:** what? no i need you to photograph? do photography?
**TT:** orly
**TG:** uh sounds vaguely familiar
**TT:** is it usual for superheroes to sell photos of their mentees
**TT:** it is usual for superheroes to have a familial or working relationship with their mentee though not always
**TT:** it makes it easier to stay in contact and to monitor and help with any effects on their personal life
**TT:** jade is beautiful with a great eye for fashion and ive had a long career as a model - long enough to have the credentials to start an agency of my own so i asked jade if she wanted to do that and she was excited to try!
**TG:** uh not that im arguing with the hotness of jade because trust me i am well aware of the hotness of jade but arent models normally more similar to a delicate blade of grass than to a wrecking ball
**TT:** do i look like a delicate blade of grass to you?
**TG:** when youre in normal clothes yeah kinda
**TG:** like not a straight up stick figure but enough that i am honestly scientifically fascinated by how
your muscles work considering that they appear underdeveloped by human standards and are yet incredibly strong
TT: dave that is incredibly insulting
TG: you said you wanted an honest photographer
TT: alright then please answer honestly- would you speak to my models this way? im fine with it ive heard a lot worse and at least in this case i can tell what you actually meant but if you would talk to them this way then i suppose that answers the question of whether or not you can photograph for me
TG: man im a dick but im not out to make girls cry
TG: i sassmouth people i know to the degree they can handle
TG: mostly because i barely speak to anyone else
TG: but i do have some degree of respect
TT: okay good
TT: in that case yes i am now aware that i had been ignoring or ignorant of certain trends in the types of people chosen as models in this industry but those standards have been in the process of change since long before i got here and so i do not think it is a big deal to offer a much wider range of people
TT: humanity is abundant with beauty and i find it unfortunate and even tragic that so many of you cannot recognize this fact
TT: i do not think i would have garnered the success with this strategy that i have were it not for the name i have built for myself already- a name and reputation that many do not have and so i feel its my duty to stay loyal to my employees and continue to pursue this strategy
TG: thats fucking beautiful where do i sign up

-- TT has transferred file contract-photographer-nonexclusive-singlebooking.pdf --

TT: you can add your digital signature or you can print & sign and bring it with you friday
TT: jade will arrive at your apartment to teleport you at 5am friday morning
TG: wait what

-- tamaranianTerror [TT] has ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] --

TG: YOU CANT CALL IT MORNING IF ITS STILL DARK OUTSIDE

-- timaeusTestified [TT] has begun pestering gardenGnostic [GG] --

TT: Jade, I need you to come get me.
TT: Jade?
TT: Jade, please answer your phone.
TT: Fuck.

-- timaeusTestified [TT] has ceased pestering gardenGnostic [GG] --

-- rollingThunder [RT] has begun pestering twinArmageddons [TA] --

RT: Ok, so plz don’t block me right away. This is Oracle.
RT: You don’t have to say anything. I know you’re still mad, and I’m going to have to learn to accept that.
RT: I just...
RT: Look, I wanted to try one more apology. Without the bravado and posturing. Without hacking your computer to talk to you. Just... normal. Honest and open like I’d have spoken to a friend.
RT: I’ve been doing some thinking, and I’ve come to realize how badly I handled this whole thing, even my previous attempts to apologize.
RT: I’ve been coming at it with my own sense of righteousness, refusing to acknowledge that you
have every reason to be wary of me and my intentions.
RT: I’ve come at it with indignation that you won’t just accept me at my word, when you don’t owe me that. You don’t owe me anything.
RT: I’ve been coming at this without a sense of empathy, w/o a sense of how very different our circumstances are, how the fact that your history is unknown to me doesn’t mean that I can assume that it is irrelevant.
RT: The fact that I didn’t intend to fuck up doesn’t change the fact that I *did* fuck up, and I am actually genuinely sorry to have hurt you, to have caused your panic.
RT: I don’t expect to be immediately forgiven. I don’t know if I can really expect to ever be forgiven, no matter what Aradia said. You don’t have to, so I’ll stop trying to force it. If you don’t want to talk to me anymore, that’s fine. This will be the last time I reach out to you unless you say otherwise.
RT: I just wanted you to know...
RT: I don’t know.
TA: god, youre melodramatic.
RT: pft
TA: ok, ii will be 2o benificent a2 two grant you my forgiivene22 on one condiition
RT: Which is...?
TA: your new batcave fiirewall ii2 miildly iimpre22iive. dont get me wrong iill get pa2t ii eventually, but iiif you could take iiit down for fiive minute2 2o ii could get iin riight now that would be awe2ome.
RT: Lmao No.
RT: Why do you have to pester Bruce right this minute anyway?
TA: man fuck bruce ii have watched more inte2tiing broken televii2iion2 becau2e iim that pathetic ii gue22
TA: diirk iinterrupted roxy and now 2he2 haviing a fiit and ii would liike two know what the fuck
RT: Interrupted Roxy doing what?
TA: exhiibiitiing her gro22 mamalian feature2 for my per2onal benefiit
RT: oh god jesus christ WHY
TA: hehe
RT: shit
TA: oh come on. you a2ked, and ii wa2 nice enough two 2tate ii mildly.
RT: Not you, the batfeed.
RT: I haven’t found Dirk yet, but it looks like Alfred was taken to the hospital. I have to call Bruce.
TA: what2 an alfred?
TA: oracle?
TA: am ii the one that fucked up now or...?
TA: hello?
RT: sorry i have to go

-- rollingThunder [RT] has ceased pestering twinArmageddons [TA] --

Chapter End Notes

Btw, if you like crying about Booster Gold and Blue Beetle, I have a fic for you: The Time Traveller's Bug
“This isn’t a dog park, Harley. You’ll have to wear a leash.”

“Just because you’re grumpy doesn’t mean you have to be rude,” she says from behind him. Jade soon walks around to the front of the park bench, gathers her skirts much more demurely than she used to, and sits. “So… wanna talk about why everybody had to call in me to find you?”

“You’re a bright girl, Harley; I’m sure you can figure it out.” Despite his attitude, Dirk doesn’t look at her as he sasses her, and the words lack any real sharpness anyway. He’s looking sullenly down at his hands instead. They’re shaking just a little bit, but she decides not to comment.

She also wouldn’t comment on whether or not she could put two and two together. There was an inkling nagging at her, sure, but she was deliberately ignoring it. Whatever happened was Dirk’s business, and if he didn’t want to tell her, she certainly would not “figure it out.” Instead, she asked, “Would you like a hug?”

Dirk snorted, and he almost seemed partway amused. Progress! “No, I definitely would not,” he says in a voice that holds no room for argument. “But, uh, thanks for asking I guess.”

“You know, in chat you talk a lot like Rose, but in real life, sometimes you sound a lot like Dave, especially when you’re being idiots.”

Dirk snorts again. She’s almost convinced she saw teeth in his bare hint of a smile this time! “Yeah, well, they are my children apparently.”

“Should I take you to Dave?”

“No.”

Jade flinches a little at the strength at which he bites out that one simple word. Has something happened between them? Jade knows that Dave had been irritated that Dirk didn’t go to Texas with him, but they haven’t fought at all since then. Though… Jade doesn’t remember them being together at all since then, either, except for group things. “Okay, um, so Roxy then?”

Dirk sighs and runs his hand through his hair, which apparently is how he styles it because the action changes very little about its orientation. “She’s just going to tell me to go back.”

“She is?”

“She says I can’t keep handling my mistakes with evasion, but, y’know, I’ve got a whole fucking planet to get lost in now,” he rambles. “So, I gotta say, I’m not entirely convinced she’s right on that.”

Jade thinks about that as she kicks at the grass beneath her feet, stirring up smells of earth and water and life. “Dirk…” She sighs and thinks some more. Tries again. “Dirk, have you ever made a sand
castle?”

That startles him enough that he actually turns to look at her. She looks back at him and waits patiently for him to answer. Finally, he shakes his head. “Uh, no. Lots of water where I’m from but no sand.”

Jade considers this information with a frown. “Do you know what I’m talking about when I mention sandcastles, or do I need to figure out something else to talk about?”

Dirk shrugs. “I’m not sure why you’re talking about them in the first place,” he admits. “But I’ve seen movies, so I think I know what you’re talking about. Take sand from the beach that’s just wet enough to adhere to itself and stack it in blocks to make castles or other shapes. Sometimes on top of a person, for the asshole points and the challenge I guess.”

Jade nods. “Yeah, that’s it,” she says. “So what usually happens afterward in the movies?”

“Uh, it’s rarely a plot device, so usually it’s just a thing that’s there, but I suppose you’re talking about the weird trend of knocking it down.”

Jade nods. “‘Yeah,’” she says. “I mean, not everyone knocks down their sandcastle. Some kids build them thinking they’ll stay. But they don’t, they’re sand. If you don’t knock them down, a bully will, or the tide, or tomorrow’s beach-goers, or the natural effect of the sun drying out the sand…”

“Are you… teaching me about… entropy?” Dirk guesses, squinting at her in confusion.

Jade shakes her head. “No, no, sorry. My point was the compulsion to knock it down. Like building the castle is really, really fun, but it reaches this point where you’re very obviously done. But… it’s really hard to leave it alone, you know? It seems weird. Inappropriate somehow. You put all this work into it and it’s yours how can you just abandon it now? It’s become part of you.

“So you keep building and go too high. Or you play and play too enthusiastically, too rough. Or maybe you just kick it down to see what will happen. Point is, the castle falls. The castle always falls. Sometimes it’s a complete destruction, and sometimes it’s partial. Sometimes it’s fun to knock it down, and sometimes it’s painful. But it always ends the same way.”

She looks at him again, and he’s still paying her rapt attention. “So… what happens next?” she asks him.

Dirk thinks back on the movies he’s seen, still not sure what her point is. Well, he’s not an idiot. He knows the point is that he can’t leave well enough alone and always tears the castle down. He’s just not sure what else there is to say about it. “Cry to your mom?” he guesses.

She smiles a bit hollowly. “Sure, that’s an option.”

But not the option she’s looking for, obviously. “Uh… stalk off in anger?”

She rolls her eyes. “If you want to be a baby about it.”

He shrugs, exasperated. “I don’t know, Harley, build another one?”

She smiles her big sad smile and nods. “Build another one.”

“Why?” Dirk demands. “What’s the point if all sandcastles always fall?”

Jade shrugs. “This universe will die. Someone, maybe, will make another one after it. Just like we
did.” She looks out over the park and tells him, “I was really sad when I thought John and Davesprite were dead. I couldn’t do anything that reminded me of them. So I would go to Rose’s planet a lot, and I would spend days building sandcastles. Sometimes I wrecked them. Sometimes they fell on their own. Sometimes it was an accident. But it always felt like my fault. It felt like if I was better at building sandcastles that I could keep them standing. My aspect is space after all!”

She shakes her head sadly. “I don’t know, Dirk,” she says. “I don’t know what the point is to building new castles over and over again. Maybe there isn’t one. I just know that it feels a lot worse when you don’t.”

Dirk doesn’t know what to say to that, so he doesn’t say anything. They sit in silence for a while.

Jade’s phone buzzes with new messages, and she starts texting someone back. Dirk forces himself not to snoop even though it would be absurdly easy. Finally, she captchalogue’s the phone again and turns back to him. “Sure you don’t want me to take you somewhere?” she asks.

Dirk shrugs. “Well, I could walk, honestly, but if you’re going to insist on it, you could take me home.” He frowns, runs his hand through his hair again. “If there’s still room for me, I mean…”

“Don’t be silly!” Jade teases. “Of course there is!” She hops up to stand in front of him and hold her hand out. “Come on Sulky McSulkface.”

He rolls his eyes, takes her hand, and in a flash of green light finds himself in a very familiar mansion. “I MEANT THE APARTMENT!” he shouts, and despite the fact that she isn’t in the room with him, he swears he can hear her giggling.

Definitely Jane’s child.

Dick looks up to see Kory approaching from down the hall. He stands to meet her, and when she sees that he’s seen her, she hesitates briefly, nervous, and guilt punches him hard in the stomach. He put that look on her face. He’s the reason she’s not sure if she’s allowed to visit a friend in the hospital.

“Came to visit Alfred?” he says, trying to sound as friendly and open as possible, no hint of anything else. He wants her to know that it’s okay.

Kory nods and takes the last few steps to meet him. “Yes, um, well, I was,” she says quickly. “I mean to say that I was already on my way over when Jade texted me that she’d found Dirk, so I thought you should know that.”

Dick almost scowls at that but quickly wipes the expression of his face lest she think he’s mad at her. “He give any clue as to why he freaked out?”

Kory digs her phone out of her handbag with a distinctly unhappy expression and reads off the screen, “Quote: ‘well hes always been kinda sensitive i think’ followed by a frownie face.” She puts the phone back in her purse.

Dick quirks an eyebrow at her. “Okay?” he says, uncertain what that’s supposed to convey.

“Right?!” Kory exclaims, throwing her hands up in the air. “That’s literally all she said besides that she found him and he is physically unharmed.” Her phone makes a noise vaguely similar to a pile of forks being dropped (Why??), and she plucks it out of her purse again. “Oh, he’s back at the mansion now.”
“Oh,” says Dick, surprised that any matter involving the kids was resolved that quickly. “Uh, great.”

“Yeah!”

Dick glances at his feet and rubs his neck uncertainly. Kory glances toward Alfred’s closed door and crosses her arms in front of her. “I’m sorry about -” they both start at the same time.

“No, you don’t have anything to apologize for!” Kory insists quickly. Instinctively, she reaches out to grab his arms in a comforting gesture, but immediately pulls them back as though she’d been about to touch hot coals.

Dick gestures to her hands emphatically. “Yes, that, Kory!” he says. “That is what I have to be sorry for. I never wanted you to think you’re not allowed to talk to me.”

“I was hanging off you,” she reminds him.

“It’s nothing unusual for you,” he reminds her.

“I’ve been told it’s usually inappropriate,” she says.

“You’re just physically expressive.”

“In a way that obviously hurts you!” she counters. “A reaction that I, of all people, should have been attuned to.”

Dick looks away again. “You didn’t hurt me, Kory,” he says a bit more quietly. “I’m just… I guess I’ve been a bit testy lately.”

“You have a right to your feelings,” Kory reminds him gently.

But Dick shakes his head. “Not when they do this,” he grumbles. He sighs. “Look, can we… How about I accept your apology for accidentally irritating me, and you accept mine for accidentally being irritable?”

Kory quirks a small smile, but it’s enough to light the whole hallway with her radiant happiness. “I think I can accept those terms,” she says.

It’s then that the door opens, and Alfred glowers at both of them as the doctor and a nurse bustle out, assuring Alfred that they’ll be right back and that he should sit down. He ignores them and says to the two who had been waiting, “I could have sworn I heard the pretty lady saying she came to visit me.” Past Alfred’s shoulder, Dick can see Bruce very pointedly not snickering.

“Alfred!” Kory cries and throws her arms around the old man, which he looks very, very cocky about (as anyone would). He doesn’t get to enjoy it long as she almost immediately holds him out from her to look him over. “How are you? What happened? Barbara told me there was a heart attack.”

“A very minor heart failure,” Alfred assures her. “It seems I may have simply skipped a beat or two. The hospital is still running tests, but so far they’ve failed to find anything worrisome.”

“Uh, isn’t that in itself worrisome?” asks Dick.

Bruce gestures for them to enter. “That’s what I’d like to discuss now that we’ll have some time before the doctors and nurses come back again.”

Curious, Dick steps aside so that Kory can guide Alfred back to his bed. Dick then enters the room
and closes the door behind him. He stays next to it where he can keep an ear out for approach.
“What’s up?” he asks quietly.

“I’ve been reviewing the footage of the batcave trying to figure out why Dirk handled Alfred’s
fainting so much worse than he’s handled all of his other issues,” says Bruce. “It is what I found that
caused me to send Cassandra home with Damian.”

“What other issues?” Kory asks, turning to Alfred.

“He means Master Dirk’s issues, not mine,” Alfred corrects her. “And he has more of them than the
Gazette. Primary among them is that he is a perfectionist that works himself to exhaustion, he reacts
defensively to the slightest of triggers, and he’s extremely paranoid. All of which is to say that he fits
in perfectly well in this household, so we’re very confused as to why he’d react this way.”

Dick shakes his head. “I don’t get it. You were sparring with Damian and Cassandra. I was
correcting Dirk’s horrendous taijiquan forms. Alfred entered near us and soon fell. I went to his aid.
When I turned around, Dirk wasn’t there. After we sent Alfred to the hospital, we looked
everywhere but had to leave without him. Nothing happened except for Dirk freaking out. What are
you so worried that our abused child assassins are gonna see that’s suddenly going to scar them for
life where nothing else has?”

Bruce rolls his eyes at him. “I’m not worried about the visuals,” he says. “But, despite what they’ve
been through, Damian and Cassandra are still children. They judge the world the way children do. I
would like the adults to discuss the matter before anyone gets the chance to jump at conclusions.”

“Oh, um, should I leave?” asks Kory.

There’s a moment where all three men stare at her before Bruce finally tilts a bemused smile toward
her and asks, “Are you not an adult, Ms. Anders?”

“Well, yes, but I’m not his adult,” Kory says. “I wouldn’t want to overstep my bounds.”

Bruce considers, then shakes his head. “You may go if you think it wise, but I think we should all
know what we’re dealing with here.”

He picks his iPad up off a countertop, types in his passcode, makes a few swipes and gestures, and
then turns the device so the three of them can see. On screen is a security camera shot of the stairs
that Alfred fell on. Nearby, Dick is on a platform lecturing a thoroughly unimpressed Dirk. Bruce
presses play.

Dirk is shifting his weight impatiently and glancing away. (Dick thinks he remembers Dirk was
glancing toward Bruce and Cass and Damian because he would rather be sparring.) Testily, because
they have literally been doing the same thing for hours by this point, Dick snaps his fingers in Dirk’s
face to get his attention back. Dick winces at the picture. He probably should have ended the session
long before then, but Dirk’s evasiveness and determination to never admit he did anything wrong
had been driving Dick up the wall.

Kory leans forward to jab the screen, making it pause. She turns to Dick. “Can I ask what was going
on there?” she says.

Dick sighs. “When he spars or fights for real, he’s great,” he says. “He uses a combination of
taijiquan and brawling. He seems to have an almost instinctual knowledge for how movement and
energy flow and how to disrupt that. But if he’s told to go through his forms on his own, he suddenly
does them horribly. Instead of being a stone in a river, he’s the agitator of a washing machine.”
Kory clicks play again and watches. She nods and observes, “Instead of letting energy flow from outside to him to outside, it comes from him and is used by him and returns to him.”

“That seems to be what he’s going for, yeah,” says Dick. “He says in this format, he can’t feel energy in the place where I tell him to get it from. I keep telling him, people who aren’t magical have to imagine it. For most people it’s a metaphor for - ”

“But he is magical?” Kory counters, clicking pause again to turn to Dick.

He startles slightly, confused. “Uh, well, yeah, he has flight and conditional immortality like the others, and his speed may or may not be supernatural, but his fight techniques rely entirely on physical skill.”

Kory shakes her head and frowns at the screen. “No, they all have powers. They don’t all use them as often as John and Jade. In the case of Jane and Dave, they almost never use them. But they’ve all got them,” she says. She glances to Dick and then to Bruce and back again. “Hasn’t he said anything about it?”

“He has admitted that his title is Prince of Heart,” Bruce says dryly.

Kory startles, looks to Alfred and then Bruce, eyes wide. “Heart?” she repeats.

Dick shrugs. “Haven’t figured it out,” he says. “He’s not exactly the loving, emotional sort.”

“No,” Kory mumbles. She shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s what it means, either.” She stares at the paused screen, obviously bothered by something. Before Dick can ask, Bruce presses play again.

It continues exactly as Dick had described. Dirk continually does his forms wrong and is almost immediately stopped and lectured only to do them wrong again. Dick then seems to get exasperated and stands in front of Dirk for Dirk to copy his own movements like a mirror. Dirk closes his eyes, probably to imagine as Dick had been instructing him to. Alfred comes down the stairs carrying a lunch tray.

Then Alfred suddenly freezes, drops the tray and then drops to the stairs, like a doll with his strings cut. There’s no clasping of the chest. No struggle to push his body through. His body simply stops for a moment.

By the time Dick is running to Alfred’s side, he’s already recovering. Behind Dick, Dirk runs away out of frame.

Next to her, the current Alfred squints at the iPad like he’s seen something interesting but can’t figure out what’s interesting about it. Kory is pretty sure she can. She reaches forward again to pause, skip backward thirty seconds, set the speed slower, and restart the video. “There,” she says, pointing. “That’s what you wanted to show us, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” says Bruce, his expression and tone unreadable. Confused, Dick steps closer for a better look. Kory skips back again to show him again. This time, Dick watches Dirk instead of Alfred.

Dirk copies Dick’s movements exactly. He closes his eyes to feel the energy. Alfred comes down the stairs, only a few yards from them and directly out from Dirk’s grasping hand. And then -

Dirk’s hand grasps at something, like he finally feels the energy he’s supposed to be directing. He pulls on instinct. Alfred falls. Dirk stops, eyes open. Dick runs toward Alfred. Dirk… opens his hand and pushes away from himself, pure horror painted on his face. Alfred comes to again. Dirk stares as Dick helps Alfred up. Takes one step back. Takes another. Runs.
“Dear god…” Dick mumbles because he doesn’t know what else to say.

Alfred stares at where the iPad was even as Bruce closes the video and puts the device away. “Poor boy,” he says quietly. “He must think he’s a villain.”

Kory shakes her head. “If you’re not careful how you handle this, he will be,” she says.

“We need to decide what we’re going to say to him,” says Bruce.

“No,” says Alfred surprising them. “You won’t say anything to him about it. Not this time.”

Dick steps forward, arguing, “Alfred, if we don’t - ”

“Do you not understand that he’s afraid of you?” Alfred demands, which takes Dick aback. “He is terribly afraid that you’ll see him for what he thinks he is, and now he is convinced that you have. If he is approached by a hero, he will think that you’re cornering him.”

“We can’t just do nothing!” Dick objects.

Alfred glances to Bruce knowingly. Bruce takes a moment to read the expression, and then the edges of his lips tilt up just slightly. “Alright, old man,” says Bruce. “We’ll do it your way.”
Recovery

Chapter Notes

Next chapter is the big plot thingy!

Also in other news: I did one of those subplot spreadsheets to keep everything straight and, um, this happened. (Rainbow parts are subplots. There are presently 18 of them.) (Also, the image is too small to read for a reason. If you go magnifying and clarifying it, you can't blame me for spoilers.))

When Dirk hears the car come home, he positions himself by the window with his laptop, bringing up the security camera footage. He gets the car up first, then goes looking for Cain and Wayne. Cain has already noticed the car as well and is on the move, but Wayne appears to have fallen asleep waiting in the foyer. He'll still the first one to meet them due to positioning.

Grayson and the larger Wayne help Pennyworth out of the car. He fusses and gestures at them to move out of the way, but while Grayson steps off, Wayne Sr. helps him up anyway. By the time they get to the foyer, Wayne Jr. has woken up and covered up his worry with his usual abrasive snark. Grayson ruffles the kid’s hair. Cain comes down the stairs at a run and stops just short of colliding with Pennyworth, practically vibrating in place like in one of those cartoons with the large beeping bird. She says something that’s probably well-wishes or concern or something else so appropriate that even a former mute knows it’s the right thing to say.

Not Dirk, though. Nope. Dirk’s going to camp out by his window for an easy escape and watch everyone through the fucking security system like a huge creep.

Creep doesn’t even begin to describe his problem.

They continue talking for a bit. Dirk has no idea what they’re saying. Concern seems to be expressed toward Pennyworth. The adults seem to reassure the children. The adults seem to ask questions of the children for some reason? Maybe asking if they’d eaten or done their homework or whatever. This goes on for a while, and then, finally, everyone divides up to head to their various beds.

Not one person goes anywhere near Dirk's room, and he has no idea how to read that.

So he climbs out the window and goes to sleep on the roof.

“I’d been knowin’ of another kind of spider-bitch once,” the creature drawls as he sways side to side in a manner that’s probably meant to look lunatic but really offers him the opportunity to check the weight of the clubs in his hands and ready himself to move in any needed direction. “Killed every little kiddy struck her as bad seed and drug them all home for dinner.”

Catalina stares at him for a long several minutes before finally replying, “Was that supposed to be an answer to my question? Because I’m pretty sure that didn’t answer my question.”

He blinks at her, if you can even call it a blink when it takes several seconds to accomplish. “Question?” he repeats, his accent like the rhythmic hissing of a cicada.
“You’ll have to excuse my friend,” says the woman he had followed in. The woman, if you could really call someone eight feet tall with thirty pounds of hair and another few yards of horn a “woman,” had arrived on somewhat trepidatious invitation. The clown-faced speech-slurred freak had been given no such invitation and was a very unwelcome surprise. “I’m still working on his manners.”

The freak’s laugh sounds like a strangled goose. Catalina winces. “Maybe you should have left it home then,” she snarls. She refuses to stop watching it. A creeping worry along her spine warns her that he is far more likely to strike when she isn’t looking that when she is.

The woman hums and glances thoughtfully to her clown, tapping her chin. “Oh, I don’t think so,” she says. “They say it’s very important to socialize your pets, don’t you think so, Tarantula? After all, you wouldn’t want me to lock you up over a little misbehavior, would you?”

Catalina snarls. “You think you’d get the fucking chance, you egotistical monster bitch?” she demands.

Or

Well, she means to demand it.

There’s no reason that she shouldn’t be able demand it, really. But when she hears the words “No, my Empress,” she’s shocked to realize that they’re hers, sparking across her tongue like the small little shocks that have been distorting her vision lately. She wants to turn to her girls, her Arañas, to see how they react, but she can’t. Her muscles no longer obey her orders, sparks down her nerves usurping her own orders in her own body. Her eyes no longer belong to her, tinted red with someone else’s vision. What is this? What is happening?

The so-called Empress smiles knowingly. “Good girl,” she coos, patronizing to the core. “Now, let’s discuss that organizational chart.”

“Yes, my Empress,” says Catalina. “I will obey, my Empress.”

TT: They still haven’t said anything.
TG: dirk its bin 16 hours an 6-9 of those hours were sleep
TT: Yeah, but they’re awake now. I can see them on the laptop.
TG: be less creepy dirk

-- TT has put away his laptop --

TT: Happy now?
TG: i would be if that wasnt a gigantic lie
TG: maybe they really didnt notice? i mean hes an old man these things happen
TT: Roxy, how on earth does someone just not notice an old man’s soul being ripped from his body?
TG: dirk you didnt rip nothin or hed be ded rite now
TG: it sounds to me like hes awfly not dead
TT: You know what I mean.
TT: Besides, say you’re right. They genuinely think I’ve got nothing to do with this. Is it really right for me to sit here and pretend nothing happened, taking advantage of their supposed naivete?
TG: no dirk youre supposed to talk to your mentor about your abilities
TT: Okay, well, that sounds fake.

Dirk looks down at his hands as text scrolls across the screen of his shades. Hands that had very
nearly torn an old man’s soul from his defenseless body. His friends were encouraging him to give
things another shot, to venture out of his room and attempt talking with the batfam again. (Sitting in a
rarely used office counts, right?) He’s trying, because he’d promised before that he would try to shut
down less, but you can only avoid the inevitable for so long. He looks at his hands and lets guilt
wash over him, threaten to drown him, and doesn’t even notice when said old man sits next to him
on the couch until said old man says, “So.”

Dirk about jumps out of his skin.

Alfred raises an eyebrow at him. “I hope I didn’t interrupt the sulking,” he says.

Dirk doesn’t know what to say, so he keeps not saying anything, which is probably the stupid thing
to do. What is he supposed to say? *Sorry, I almost killed you with a wave of my existential
murderclaws?*

“... Right,” says Alfred. He gazes ahead at the bright, sunny, colorful garden out the window that
doesn’t match the mood of the day at all, much less Gotham city as a whole. “I suppose I’ll talk then.
I’ve been informed by Master Bruce that apparently *this* - ” He gestures to his chest, roughly where
his heart should be. “ - is your doing?”

Alfred’s looking looking at him again. Is he expecting an answer? Shit, he’s probably expecting an
answer. Dirk considers making a run for it. Instead, he says, “Yes.” Then, “Um, sorry?” Wow, that
was pathetic. Way to sound like you’d give no shits about murdering this man.

“Well, then… I guess I can cancel that cardiologist appointment after all?” When Dirk just stares at
him in bafflement, he elaborates, “It’s good to know I’m not *too* old yet.”

“Dude, I nearly killed you.”

Alfred *scoffs* at that. “When Master Bruce accidentally set off the alarm at four in the morning
because he was too beat up to stand properly, much less turn the damned thing off, and thus I
discovered that my ward had decided it would be a fantastic idea to become a masked vigilante in
one of the most corrupt cities in the country, *that* nearly killed me,” he says. “This little palpitation
was an accident.”

“Alfred!” Dirk objects, incensed that such a serious crime would be so easily dismissed.

“*Dirk,*” Alfred counters and, somehow, for some reason, that actually temporarily shuts Dirk up.
Parental powers like whoa, as Roxy might say. “I am going to tell you what I have never told
another, because, frankly, you’re my first metahuman. But I’ve said versions of it before countless
times because I have known plenty of stupid boys long before you came along, including the one
currently acting as your guardian.”

Dirk can’t help but huff out a small laugh at Bruce Wayne being referred to as a “stupid boy.”

“You are not defined by your powers, Dirk,” says Alfred.

“Dude, that’s literally what - ”

“*You are not defined by your powers,*” Alfred repeats, even more insistently. “You are not defined
by your history. You are not defined by your relations. You are not defined by your mistakes.”

“You don’t get it!” Dirk cries, jumping to his feet. “I am! I literally am! The titles aren’t some
whimsical system we came up with on our own!” he cries. “They describe our mythological roles.
Not just what our abilities are, but who we’re supposed to be! What role we play! I was the Prince of
Heart! My job was to fucking destroy people! I have ruined everything I’ve ever cared about! How can you sit there talking to me like I’m not evil?"

“Because evil isn’t something you are, Dirk; it’s something you do,” Alfred snaps. He hasn’t moved. He isn’t raising his voice. But his gaze is firm and penetrating and his voice is sharp and clear, and it forces Dirk to listen to what he has to say. “To say otherwise is an excuse. Even the Joker was once born an innocent child. Whatever may or may not have happened to him, whatever may or may not have shaped his course in life, everything evil thing that man has done was a choice he made. When he shot a teenage girl in the back, when he beat a young boy to death, that wasn’t destiny. That wasn’t fulfillment of some larger, inevitable purpose. That was a man who was deciding, in that moment, to do unspeakable evil.

“If you had killed me back in the Batcave, it still wouldn’t have been an evil act, and it certainly wouldn’t have somehow instantaneously turned you into a villain,” says Alfred. “Because it was an accident. You didn’t choose to hurt me. I saw the surveillance video; you were clearly and immediately shocked and distressed, and, trust me boy, you are not nearly as good of an actor as you think you are. You can’t be evil by accident, Dirk. That’s not how it works. It would have been unfortunate. It would have been sad. It would have, potentially, been horribly painful for everyone involved, especially myself I should think. But it wouldn’t have been evil. Nothing in this world can make you evil against your will, that defies the very definition.

“And that is why Master Bruce and Master Richard and, yes, even I want you to be here,” Alfred insists. “They would gladly tell you that themselves, but I thought, given the circumstances, it might mean more coming from me.” Alfred sighs heavily and carefully considers what he’ll say next while the boy standing in front of him stares at the ground with tightly clenched fists held stiffly at his sides. “Dirk, there is a world out there that will gladly tell you the opposite of what I just have. That will gladly twist you up in exactly the manner you expect to be twisted.

“But here? Here is one of the few places where you’ll learn that darkness is not the same as destiny.”

Dirk kind of wants to hug the man. Instead, he crosses his arms and continues glowering at the floor, using his ducked head and large shades to hide his face.

Alfred isn’t fooled an ounce. The old man actually sighs heavily and rolls his eyes. “And yes, Master Dirk, I promise not to tell anyone you cried.”

Dirk vocalizes his amusement by making an extremely undignified combination of snort and hiss and sob. “God, you are observant,” he mumbles. He gives up on pretending and raises up his shades to wipe his eyes properly.

Alfred calmly stands and offers him a handkerchief. “Yes, well, I do live with ninjas,” he says.

Before Dirk can accept it, an alert goes off in the corner of his shades, and he quickly replaces them again. Not a moment later, the doorbell sounds. Alfred glances in the general direction of the door. “Now who can that be at this early hour?” Alfred wonders as he replaces the handkerchief.

“She Maryam-looking lady that’s mentoring Jane,” answers Dirk. “And also Jane.”

Alfred gives Dirk a dubious glance. “You can feel her at this distance?” he asks.

Dirk shakes his head and points to his shades. “Nah, man, I’m wired in.”

Alfred blinks. Blinks again. When he realizes what Dirk means, he sighs heavily and shakes his
head. “Master Dirk, please go outside and make friends,” he grumbles as he makes his way out of the room presumably to answer the door. Because he has nothing else to do and also he kind of misses Jane - he’s still not used to spending such large amounts of time away from his friends, spoiled by their time together in the game - Dirk follows Alfred to the door. If Alfred thinks anything of it, he doesn’t make his opinion known.

Alfred opens the door and pretends to be surprised. “Ms. Kane. Welcome. I assume you’re here to talk to Master Bruce?”

“Yes, I - ”

It’s then that the intercom suddenly activates with a screech. “All bats to cave,” Nightwing’s voice snaps urgently. “We have a code blue! Hurry!”

“The fuck is a code blue?” Dirk asked, not hurrying at all.

Kate had already pushed past him and was pulling Jane along toward the elevator. “Trouble in Metropolis that the Supers can’t handle,” she answers.

Dirk takes about half a second to be surprised, and then he runs after her.
mademoisellePlume and I are getting married on Oct 31, so there’s gonna be a BIG fic break mid-Oct to mid-Nov. I’d like to get ch. 25 up before the break though, so I’ll try to hurry that one out.

**BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM**

Shot after shot rings out through the streets of Metropolis as Jake tries valiantly to fly fast enough to avoid the monsters while also trying to shoot them down. On the rare occasion that Superman ever allows him to use firearms, it has only ever been with rubber bullets, but this, apparently, is a special case. “Special” meaning that these things aren’t stopping even under the same fire power that had regularly sluwn Jake’s dinner on Dinosaur Island. At least he’s distracting the beasts from gnawing on citizens.

When Jake shoots one of them square in the eye only for the bullet to bounce, he captchalogues his weapons and concentrates on luring the creatures toward his compatriots. “What are these things?!” he shouts as Superboy swoops down to capture the largest of them, pulling it up and away in a choke hold that still does nothing to kill the beast.

“What?!?” Superboy answers, which answers absolutely nothing, and Jake isn’t convinced it wasn’t merely a noise made in struggle. As Superboy continues his mid-air wrestling match, he glances toward something in the distance and seems slightly relieved. “At least we have backup!” he says.

Jake turns just in time to see a familiar orange and black blur streak past him, sword angled to slice through a majority of the monster pack. That is, until a blue and red streak tackles Dirk from the other direction. The two tumble, twist, and finally come to a stop with Supergirl sitting on Dirk’s chest, desperately grabbing his sword hand. “You can’t!” she cries. “They’re Kryptonian!”

“What?!” Jake and Superboy demand together. A monster dives for the two heroes on the ground, and Jake decaptchalogues an elephant gun and shoots it in the head. He might not be able to kill the things, but the blow at least stuns the monster temporarily and knocks it aside.

Dirk glowers up at her. “So we can’t use lethal methods because they’re one of the last remaining reminders of your homeworld?” he asks in an icy deadpan.

“What? No!” Supergirl objects. “I mean you’ll break your sword!”

“... Oh.” Dirk captchalogues his sword, though he can’t help feeling a bit doubtful about the claim.

Blasts of heat vision startle the monsters into scattering, and Superman lands next to the four teenagers. Soon, the Batmobile along with Nightwing and Batwoman’s motorcycles each screech to a stop on the street. Batgirl swings in on a line from god-knows-where, and Jane lands delicately next to her. Supergirl stands up as the Batmobile opens and Batman and Robin clamber out. She offers Dirk a hand, but he pretends not to notice it as he flips back onto his feet. “She says the monsters are Kryptonian,” Dirk calls out to the Bats.
“Well, that certainly explains a lot,” Superman grumbles.

Dirk glances back at him. “You mean you didn’t know?”

“I don’t have all the various fauna from a planet I left as a baby memorized?” asks Superman. “No, sorry.”

Dirk glances from Superman to Supergirl, who is clearly half his age. “But she does?”

Supergirl laughs, catching on to his confusion. “Shenanigans,” she quotes back at him, wiggling her fingers in his face. He leans back away from her and shoots her a dirty look that he’s not sure if she can see through the shades or not.

“Something I would have liked to have known before leaving Gotham,” Batwoman grumbles. “Though even if we had kryptonite to help us, just having it on us would affect you.”

“He has some in his lead-lined glove compartment,” Superman says, pointing a thumb toward Batman.

Superboy turns to stare at his partial gene contributor. “What?” he says in a deadpan so deadpan it makes Dirk a little jealous.

“What?” Superman repeats back, genuinely confused.

Superboy just shakes his head. “You two are so weird.”

“Okay, here’s the plan,” says Batman. “All fliers keep to high altitude, and beat the monsters back down toward us. That includes Maid of Life and Page of Hope. Batwoman, Nightwing, Robin, Batgirl, I’ll be distributing kryptonite and kryptonite-laced weapons among you. Proximity to the kryptonite should be enough to weaken them, so use the weapons carefully and only when needed. Obviously, we have a very limited supply of them.”

“Don’t waste time trying to capture them,” Superman instructs. “Go directly for the kill. They’re not real, manifested into this dimension by Mr. Mxyzptlk, and he can create them faster than we can knock them out, and if he gets bored of this tactic, he’ll simply come up with more to throw at us. That’s why, Prince, you’re on combat operations.”

“What?” Dirk demands. “But this is the one thing I’m good at!”

“Actually, your brains are pretty useful, too, when you use them,” says Nightwing. “We need you to use your tech and algorithms to try to figure out where the beasts are being generated from and try to locate Mxyzptlk so Superman can trick him into saying his name backwards, which will eject him back to his own dimension for about a month or so.”

A particularly high-pitched scream of terror breaks through the discussions, making a point that the monsters have gone back to wrecking the city while the heroes strategize. Superman scowls unhappily. “If everyone is clear on the plan, then start now,” he commands. Superman scowls unhappily. “If everyone is clear on the plan, then start now,” he commands. Superboy, Supergirl, Jake, and Jane all shoot off into different directions with Superman on their heels. The Bats and Birds immediately turn their attention to retrieving weapons from Batman.

With a sigh, Dirk flies up to a particularly tall building, finds a good position to watch from, and waits. It actually takes him a whole 17 seconds to remember that in order to track the beasties, he’s got to activate the tracking program himself and mentally highlight each target. Nightwing might be impressed by his supposed skills but using technology isn’t his thing anymore. Hasn’t been for years. He had designed his tech to use itself. He had built AR to run these programs and algorithms so he
could concentrate on the hand-to-hand. The only reason he’s ever been good at this shit was because, just once in his life, he had fucking delegated.

And then he’d killed AR. Killing him by accidentally leaving him behind wasn’t any better than if Dirk had smashed those lenses back when AR was pestering him for a body, no matter what Roxy says about it.

Dirk is distracted from his thoughts by a large boom. He looks up to see that Harley (as Ms. Witch) and Starfire have gleefully joined the fray. Huh. If they’ve got space powers on their side now, do they really need Dirk’s shades to track Mr. Fuckface?

Do they really need Dirk at all, when the only thing he’s good at is hurting people? It’s not like AR had exactly reigned that in, but at the very least they were capable of calling each other out on it. Dirk had always been better at analyzing things from a distance, so what better way to catch himself in the act of stupidity than a separated version of himself? Of course, he says better at analyzing from a distance, but he is doing a shitty job of tracking these -

“AGH!” Jake cries as he slams into Dirk, met with an equivalent “UMF!” Dirk doesn’t have time to worry about sliding off the fucking building, when the two of them are almost instantaneously blinded by a brilliant gold flash.

“JAKE! DIRK!” someone screams, and Dirk realizes that he’s falling. He makes a pathetically slow grab for the roof, but it isn’t there anymore. Luckily, someone catches him. Someone with thin arms built like rocks. “Dirk, are you okay? What happened?”

Dirk blinks the black and red dots from his vision only to have his whole world consumed by flames, which is alarming until he puts together the weird body and the voice and the fact that he isn’t dead and realizes that the fire is Starfire’s hair. “Jake,” he groans, trying to twist around in her grip.

“Jade has him. Jane is looking him over,” Starfire assures him.

“Looking him - ? Let me go; I can fly on my own,” he snaps a little too harshly as he pushes away from her. She lets him go, and he pretends not to notice that her arms are still hovering around him like a concerned mother watching baby’s first steps. He doesn’t have time to worry about her, or the fact that he feels like his head has been smashed in with a sledgehammer. He has to find - Oh hey.

Somehow, despite the fact that he clearly wasn’t running the show anymore, his trackers had kicked into gear on their own and had now highlighted every single monster with little red targets and was graphing their trajectory to find an origin point.

-- timeausTestified [TT] sent coordinates.gif to gardenGnostic [GG] --

Jade will be easily able to organize the fight from there. Meanwhile, Dirk ignores Starfire’s words of confused concern and nosedives for a purple fire hydrant on 42nd street, slicing through it with his sword. It sprays out a multicolor fountain that arcs perfectly across the street to amalgamate into the form of a some kind of leprechaun in a vomit-colored suit. It snarls at Dirk, “A sword isn’t smarts, boy! You can’t beat me with a blade!”

Sensor analytics fly across the screens of his shades, and Dirk scowls to see that no, he won’t beat this creature with a blade. It’s barely even physical. But he also sees that Superman is busy, and you know what? Trickery is for assholes. He’s not playing this imp’s game.

Instead, he captchaLogues his sword and moves into a now familiar stance. “Come at me, bro.”

Mr. Mxyzptlk makes a noise of disapproval and disappears - almost. With a grab around the not yet
dispersed energy, Dirk easily pulls the imp back into form with an almost elegant movement. Mr. Mxyzptlk pops right back into being and falls on its face. “Oof! What the - ?”

Dirk does not let go of the energy, instead winding it tighter. “Say it, bitch,” he snarls.

“What are you - ?” And then, the creature realizes what threat Dirk is making, and it laughs. “Please. Even if you could damage me, you never would! You’re one of the he - AGH!”

“Sure about that?” Dirk asks coolly, fingers sinking into the gathered energy.

Mxyzptlk glares at him for a moment, then apparently decides not to risk it. Dirk feels the ball of energy attempt to push out from his fingertips, but he just holds tighter, making Mxyzptlk cry out in pain. Terror briefly flits across the creature’s face, clearly never having come up against this kind of ability before. “Nuh-uh,” Dirk warns. “Dispersal not allowed. You make one and only exit from here, dude.”

Mxyzptlk growls low in its throat. “Next time, Prince, I am coming for you!” it threatens. And then, “Kltptyxm!”

The energy implodes into non-existence, the monsters disappear, and Dirk relaxes. Superman quickly lands next to him. “How did you trick him?” he asks.

“I didn’t,” Dirk grumbles. And before Supes can ask for details, he demands, “Where’s Jake?”

“Here,” Jake calls weakly, and Dirk turns toward the rest of the street, where Superboy, Supergirl, Starfire, Jade, Jake, and Jane are landing. Batman, Robin, Nightwing, Batgirl, and Batwoman are quickly swooping in toward the rest of the group. Jake is a bit wobbly on his feet, holding onto Jane’s shoulder, but he gives Dirk a weak smile. “Sorry to worry, chap, but that beastie knocked me for a loop! I feel like my brain’s gone through a blender.”

“Wasn’t the monster,” says Dirk. “It was you.”

Jake blinks at him, confused. “What?”

Dirk can’t keep the smile off his face as the battle adrenaline seeps out of him and pure joyous relief floods into the void even as exhaustion begins to take over. “You did it, man,” he tells him. “You figured out your power.”

“I… what?” Jake’s head then jerks as a pesterchum chat lights up on his glasses. Jane and Jade both are also distracted by their glasses. Jade eyes Dirk in confusion. Jane gasps, hand to her mouth, and turns in shock to Jake. Jake’s mouth opens and closes several times before he finally gasps out, “Oh my… Is this… Is it real? It’s not Mxyzptlk?”

“Nah, man, it’s you,” Dirk insists. “I felt it!”

“Mxyzptlk’s effects disappear when he does, mostly,” Superman confirms. He gestures to the city around them, which is no longer trashed, unaccosted citizens shooting them confused glances as they give the heroes a politely wide berth. Even the clocks appear to have reset. Huh.

“I don’t understand,” says Nightwing. “What are you four so worked up about? What did J - The Page do?”

“They’re wet over the return of the masturbatory robot,” an accented voice answers. They all turn their attention to a new troll, almost as tall as Roxy and skeletally thin, though built to pack more weight than she does if the severely jutting hipbones and wide shoulders are anything to judge by.
She has Aradia’s huge ram horns, her irises and clothes are rust color, but her hair lacks Aradia’s wooly curls, instead pulled back into a tight bun.

A human man runs up behind her, looking every bit like one of the fictional adventurer-heroes Jake had looked up to except for the fact that he’s dressed like Christmas. “Hi, sorry!” he gasps, a bit out of breath. “Uh, Rip Hunter. Is me. Her mentor. I apologize for anything she has said, because I’m sure it was horrible.”

Batman tilts his head in the way that indicates he would be raising an eyebrow if his eyebrows could be seen. “You traded places with Booster?” he asks, surprised.

“What?” Hunter glances toward Damara, then realizes the confusion. “Oh, no, this isn’t Aradia. This is Damara. She didn’t introduce herself?”

“Nah, just rolled up and started making assumptions about my sexual proclivities,” Dirk informs him blandly.

“Will you cry about it?” Damara mocks, and this time it is Dirk who raises the eyebrow.

“No?” he says, and Damara genuinely looks disappointed.

“Enough,” Rip snaps at her in what, when used by Batman, Nightwing has called the “dad voice.” “This isn’t what we came here for.” Damara opens her mouth to make the obvious joke, and Rip makes a slicing gesture for her to cut it out. “By now you’ve realized that Jake can bring back persons who were left behind in their prior universe, which means Damara and I can finally help without endangering the timeline.”

“Oh, is that what happened?” asks Jake.

“Universe?” says Batman.

Rip ignores them. “Which means we must promptly discuss strategy for upcoming events,” he warns. “Trust me, you’re going to want all the temporal cheats available on this one.”

“Preferably somewhere other than the street,” Superman says in a somewhat distracted tone as he keeps an eye out for a particularly invasive journalist.

“You’re saying some other kind of big bad is coming?” asks Supergirl, concerned.

“It’s what I’d come to Batman to talk about, isn’t it?” Batwoman growls. “Crocker is preparing to make her move.”

“What?” Jake squeaks.

“That’s impossible! Roxy killed her!” Dirk snaps. He turns on Jade. “Did you do this?”


“She’s the Thief of Life,” Jane points out. “We were foolish to think it would be that easy. And the fact that Cherubs still exists mean that extrauniversal beings can get here just as easily if not more so than we did, and the fact that she has previously jumped from Alternia to beta Earth to alpha Earth means that she does, in fact, have extrauniversal abilities.”

“So… we didn’t win?” Jake says, his voice small and pained.

“We’re only just starting,” says Jane.
Back to the Fucked

Chapter Notes

Just a note, if you read this by exporting as a document, Hal's text will look like part of the narrative as it isn't happening in the context of Pesterchum. Just a warning, because I often read long fics that way, and it can be confusing.

After a brief negotiation of logistics, Jade calling everyone dummies, and a flash of green light, everyone is again gathered in the same large room of the Watchtower just as they had been when the League had initially confronted them, the two major differences being that 1) Jade hadn't been careful about the placement so not only were the two groups intermingled, but some were sprawled across each other, and 2) Jade, unlike the Justice League, appeared to consider Terezi and Vriska part of “everyone.”

She also still seemed to think Roy and Jason were part of this, much to their displeasure. Roy, who had been holding his daughter when he was transported, and therefore had accidentally taken Lian with him to the Watchtower, promptly chewed her out over it, and he, then Jason, were sent back to whence they came among profuse apologies. Jane’s dad was sent back as well because apparently he had a cake in the oven at home. All in all, the total was: Dirk, Batman, Nightwing, Robin, Batgirl, Batwoman, Jane, Jake, Superman, Superboy, Supergirl, Starfire, Jade, Rip Hunter, Damara, Aradia, Booster Gold, Dave, Karkat, Kanaya, Raven, Rose, Terezi, Vriska, Roxy, Calliope, Black Canary, Green Arrow, John, Red Robin, Sollux, and Oracle.

“Oh hell no!” Ollie objects at almost the same moment that Roxy screams in glee and races to Terezi, even sparing a moment to ruffle Vriska’s hair despite her vivid threats.

“As much as I hate that place, you should have talked to us before breaking us out,” Vriska snarled. “You idiots are going to fuck everything up without a good plan to - ”

“No one is breaking anyone out of anywhere!” Jade shouts quickly as the tension begins to rise even further in the room right along with the confusion. “I just thought you should be a part of the discussion. I’ll put you back when I’m done. Dave can even help put you back to when I got you from so that no one will notice.”

“I think you have gravely misunderstood the point of jail,” Black Canary grumbles.

“Oh, like any of your villains actually stay,” Vriska snarls. “And discuss what?”

“Vriska,” says Terezi, and then, instead of explaining, she grabs Vriska by the chin and turns her head to look.

“... Why am I staring at the even uglier Strider?” Vriska asks her moirail.

With a sigh, Dirk steps up to them, takes Terezi’s wrist, and moves both Terezi’s hand and Vriska’s head so that Vriska is looking at Damara instead. Damara says something in Japanese. Dirk turns to her with a raised eyebrow, letting go of Terezi, and asking, “Uh, did you switch languages because you’re under the impression that no one here can understand Japanese, because I assure you that is not the case.”
Damara blinks once at him, then asks coolly, “What the fuck is ‘Japanese’?”

“She’s speaking East Alternian, dumbass,” Vriska growls, pulling Terezi’s hands off her face. “And the accent is more of a problem than the language.”

“Okay, sure,” Dirk says blandly.

“English and polite, please?” Rip groans at his charge, tired of asking.

She blinks at him and says slowly, as though talking to an idiot, “Ask on your knees, and I will consider it.”

Rip buries his head in his hands and makes a noise of pure frustration. It’s interrupted by the somewhat amused and somewhat horrified disbelief of Booster Gold, who currently has a sleepy Aradia propped on his shoulder. “Jesus, Hunter, what did you do to piss off future Ar - Aradia?”

His teasing peters out a bit at the end there as he realizes just exactly how different the two Megidos are.

Damara glowers at him and says something probably horrible, and Aradia mumbles weakly, “Not me. Hi, Damara. Nice to see your skeleton again.”

“Hello, fat clone,” Damara drawls. “My digestion sac purges at your presence.”

“I’m sure it would if, by the looks of you, you weren’t possibly still dead.”

“Uh…” says Booster.

“You said there weren’t any more trolls,” Black Canary says calmly but with a sharp edge of warning in her voice.

“Th-there aren’t!” Jake insists. “Not… not yet.”

“Actually, there are yet,” Jane says meekly. “That’s what Jade gathered us here to discuss.”

“I understand.” Batwoman says carefully, “why you children would want to keep certain matters private. But the more that has been revealed in our investigation of Crocker Corp, the more Jane has had to explain to me. Knowing what we know now, I think it’s time you come clean about how you got here.”

“Why should we?” Dave snarls. He shoots an angry glare at Jane as he argues with Batwoman. “All any ‘f you’ve done since we got here is ride our asses over y’r personal issues an’ - ”

“Dave, did you not hear them say ‘Crocker’?” Karkat interrupts.

Dave deflates slightly under the weight of his surprise. “Uh, no. I was too busy bein’ mad,” he admits.

“Wait, you can’t be serious,” John objects. “It’s just a baking company. I know the Condesce used to run it, but that doesn’t mean - ”

“Baking company?” Superboy asks, disbelieving. “You mean Crocker as in Betty Crocker?”

Before anyone can answer, Sollux, already curled up in a corner with his husktop, snarls, “Hey, who the fuck is in my system? This isn’t Roxy or Oracle.”

Every one of the former players turns to him, then. “You said he didn’t make it,” Dave says, toneless. “I recall it being a not-too-well-concealed fed’ral fuckin’ issue.”

“He didn’t,” says Dirk. “Jake brought him back a few minutes ago.”

And now everyone turns to Jake, who is turning redder by the minute and using all his strength to resist the urge to hide behind Superman. “I- I don’t know how I- It was an accident? But, um, apparently, uh, the hope thing…”

“I was thinking about AR and not paying as much attention to the battle we were involved in as I could have been when Jake was thrown into me and a flash went off,” Dirk explains. “Once I recovered, I realized the shades were back to normal instead of… What they had become. AR soon said hello… Well, using a few more words.”

The screens against the wall suddenly turn black, and then display the words

I believe what I said was "I can't believe after all of that fuckery, I died and came back to sit on your ugly ass nose again."

And by "believe," I mean "know for fact" as my robotic memory is obviously infallible.

Roxy screeches. Karkat gapes with an open mouth. Sollux types furiously. John just kind of stares at the screens with his head tilted like a confused puppy. Rose is smiling a sliver more than Rose usually smiles.

Hi. Nice to "see" you, too, Roxy.

In that moment, Roxy gleefully jets across the room and tackles Dirk, which makes him screech with far less glee. “The fuck?!" he demands. “I’m not the one who just came back from the dead!”

Well… technically…

“Shut up, jerkface!” says Roxy, rubbing her face into his shirt sleeve to wipe away her tears. “I can’t hug the computer screens. They’re too high. You’ll just have to serve as proxy until I’m hugged out.”

“Roxy, you can fly,” Dirk objects, blushing madly.

“Ssh, too late,” she says. Despite that, she leans up on her toes and gives his shades a giddy peck, leaving a smear of lipstick. Dirk’s scowl deepens.

“I’m sorry,” Superman says, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he tries to keep up with all the details being casually thrown around. “Are you saying that the friend that Jake brought back from the dead is a computer program?”

Artificial intelligence, actually.

That is to say, an organic intelligence which was replicated and encoded to become artificial.

“Your friend became a computer program?” asks Superman, and Dirk, Roxy, Jane, and Jake nod in unison.

“And you refer to them as ‘the Auto Responder’?” Nightwing demands. “They don’t have a name?”

Well, literally anything is better than "Dirk," though that's never stopped some people. You can call me Hal.
Silence falls over the room. One by one, the heroes turn, again, to Dirk. “He’s you?” Black Canary demands.

“Was me,” Dirk corrects coolly. “We haven’t been the same person for over three years. Nearly four now. Some differences have accumulated.”

“How?” asks Batman at the same time that Superman demands, “Why?”

Dirk points to Batman and answers, “Made a ghost image of my brain and used the captcha code to encode the personality and memories into the program.” He points to Superman and says, “Because.”

“And what is a ghost image?” asks Batman.

“It means,” says Terezi, “that he attempted to captchalogue his brain. However, as his brain was going to be in use in the future, this created a paradox, which means that the image of the brain appears on a captcha card with the alchemization code on the back, but the card itself does not actually contain a brain.”

“Yeah, basically,” says Dirk with a shrug.

“However,” Terezi continues sharply, now sniffing in his general direction with an unhappy scowl. “As you are not a time player, there is absolutely no way you could have known with certainty that your brain would be of use in the future, that the attempt to captchalogue would cause a paradox and thus a ghost image. You could not have ensured that you would not have succeeded in capturing it and thus murdering yourself. And the guilt that comes off you in waves tells me that, unlike Dave and his hilarious shenanigans, you actually knew this at the time.”

“Wait, what?” says Dave.

Jake looks over at Dirk with newfound concern. “Wait, Dirk, is that all true?”

“Gross,” Vriska grumbles under her breath.

Dirk practically growls at Terezi, “I’m not a fucking criminal just because - ”

“I don’t like guilt,” Terezi says seriously. “It hinders the team and prevents you from performing your best. If Crocker’s back, we can’t have our Prince holding back because he still feels bad about the one time he was weak and is afraid others will find out. You tried to die. You failed. You took that failure and made a tool that would help you and your friends succeed in your future survival.”

Well, he failed that time.

Since then, he's become pretty good at dying.

Dirk flips off the screens despite knowing that Hal is technically within his shades. Flipping off his own face would be awkward and uncool.

“Oh, that reminds me,” says Damara, flipping through her sylladex. “I have a present for you.” There’s the small flash of decapeptchaloguing an object, and then she throws his own head to him, which he catches on reflex.

Several members of the party react in horror, while others draw their weapons. Dirk just blinks down at his cold, ashen, smelly head. It’s been dead awhile. “Uh, thanks?” Dirk says. “I assume this means you altered my timeline, but I don’t know what you expect me to do with it.”
Damara opens her mouth to answer, and Rip again makes his slicing motion. “No,” he says sharply. Damara sighs and rolls her eyes toward the ceiling. “Will you please get rid of it?” he asks. “The heir is going to throw up.”

“I’m fine,” John whimpers, turned with his back toward the grisly scene. Red Robin takes a long step away from him just in case.

Damara complains that her mentor is a pain in the ass but steps forward and takes the head from Dirk. In her hand, the flesh dries up and crumbles away, then the bone cracks and crumbles until it is dust. She dumps the resultant dust on the floor unceremoniously.

“Holy shit, she’s actually helping,” Karkat whispers too loudly to really be called a whisper unless you know him well enough.

“Well, color me terrified,” Dave answers.

Damara grins at them viciously.

“Okay, pause,” Starfire snaps. She jabs a finger in Damara’s direction. “Is she evil? Because I would really like to trust you, Rip, but she seems pretty evil.”

“Neutral with a heavy dose of schadenfreude, but she hates the bad guys much more than she is indifferent to the good guys,” he explains quickly. “Look, we keep getting off-topic. I understand why you’re all very curious about these other matters, but Jane needs to explain what’s going on with Crocker.”

Jane crosses her arms and frowns at the floor as she thinks. “I do,” she says. “And I want to. I just… I don’t even know where to start.”

“How about with the lie of how you got here?” Batman suggests, which brings the group’s shocked attention to himself. “I’m not Rip, but it seems to me that timelines should change, not collapse.”

“You’d be surprised,” Dave grumbles.

“Which is why,” Batman continues pointedly, “I said nothing on it before. As I stated, I may be many things, but time traveler isn’t among them. Usually. That said, I mention it now because I could not help but notice that when Jane and Batwoman made their earlier reveal, the declarations of horrified disbelief were not directed at Rip and Damara, who might be able to give answers on a damaged timeline, but to Jade.”

There is a long silence as Batman’s words settle into the present minds. The various mentees and associates either began showing guilt or looked to Jade expectantly. Jade’s own features are conflicted, but her ears and tail hang low. The mentors themselves are a mix of shocked and worried and apprehensive.

Finally, Jade nods, making up her mind, stands straight, and explains, “Caliborn, Calliope’s dominant half, became Lord of Time, and he started destroying everything just because he could. Roxy pulled Calliope’s deceased soul out of the dream bubbles created by Feferi Peixes, giving her life again, and I found an alternate dominant Calliope in the dream bubbles, who had become the godtiered Muse of Space. We defeated the people trying to kill us, including the Condesce, and seeded the new universe. Vriska flipped the end game door, and we made our getaway. And then the other Calliope collapsed the old universe behind us so that it had never been, locking Caliborn, his possibilities, and the lives he had destroyed within.”

“While I appreciate your honesty,” says Oracle, “it’s still pretty obvious that you’re holding a lot
“Dude, if we told y’ the whole story, we’d be here all fuckin’ day,” Dave snaps.

“I’m game,” Oracle says. There’s no argument from the other heroes.

Dave seethes and starts to object, but instead, John says, his voice small and nervous and squeaking a bit, “It started on my birthday. The S Burb beta had just been released and - ”

“The bitch asked for the whole story, dumbass,” Damara interrupts. John startles, and Damara locks eyes on Oracle with a vicious grin. “It began when two idiots named Latula Pyrope and Mituna Captor hacked their way into a delta copy of the S grub game…”
Superman, Batman, Green Arrow, Black Canary, Raven, and Wonder Woman sit in a room.

“That is… quite a lot,” Wonder Woman says, face carefully blank as she considers the information relayed to her. Luckily, Hal had spent the conversation compiling a detailed document with helpful graphs, so relaying the whole story wasn’t all that hard. What was hard was figuring out what to do with the information.

“Okay, so tell me something,” says Green Arrow. “Raven, Wonder Woman, you two know literal gods. How is their story possible while these other entities also exist?”

“It’s not just possible, it is is definite,” Raven corrects him. “I knew from the beginning, but I warned them not to tell you as it seemed quite probable that you would engage in, as Dave puts it, ‘an existential flip off the universal handle’. In answer to your question, however, the matter is simple: They created our universe to be created by others. It was made with a mythologies already in place which did not involve them.”

“Back then, we might have flipped out,” Black Canary admits. “But, gods or not, these are good kids. If they wanted to rule us, they could have. What they obviously want is a chance at the lives the game denied them.”

“They’ve been through a lot,” Superman agrees.

“And they’re about to go through more,” Wonder Woman says. “It’s clear that we’ll have to inform the League at large of these new and powerful enemies, so I suppose the question you have brought me in to discuss is how much we tell them of what we now know.”

“It’s still possible that there will be ‘existential flips’,” says Batman. “And not everyone is convinced that we can trust these kids to have the right motives.”

“So we decide for them what they do and don’t get to know?” demands Green Arrow.

Batman and Superman give him very pointed looks.

“What?”

Wonder Woman shakes her head, “Normally, I would not condone coddling our friends, but if this ‘Condesce’ is truly as bad as they make her out to be, then we don’t have time to waste on personal crisis. We can tell them the full story afterward.”
“That seems kind of manipulative,” says Superman.

“Have you considered a warning label?” Raven asks.

Green Arrow balks. “What like, ‘Warning: Contents within may cause existential crisis about the nature of existence. Read only if you’re already comfortable with questioning or denying that.’?”

“Yes,” says Raven.

“... Actually, yeah, that could work,” Green Arrow admits.

“Problem is, what are we even supposed to do with this information?” says Wonder Woman. “Her Imperious Condescension has ruled and subjugated Alternia, manipulated the Sburb Beta Earth, and ruled and destroyed the Sburb Alpha Earth. Furthermore, they say that she is ‘Thief of Life,’ not only impossible to kill but highly skilled at killing on a mass scale. If these god-children cannot handle her, how shall we?”

“That is the very reason that we need to have a League-wide meeting,” says Batman. “Meanwhile, the children are working on increasing our chances.”

“Is he trying to hope or trying to poop?” Nightwing asks, and Starfire elbows him in the ribs.

Jake sighs heavily. “I’m sorry, guys,” he says, looking up at those still left in the room they’d originally gathered in. “I just… I really don’t know what I did in battle to make this happen.”

“Well, I was thinking about AR when you ran into me,” says Dirk. “What were you thinking about?”

“Um…” Jake rolls his eyes upward as though expecting to see the memory on the back of his eyelids. “I honestly don’t recall thinking anything aside from ‘oh shit oh shit oh shit’?”

“Hal, you have better sensors,” Jane says to the bank of computer screens. “Do you have any extra data that could help?”

Reminder that I wasn’t extant for the incident that lead to my existence for obvious reasons.

But yes.

I’ve been making observations and crunching numbers with the help of this massively overhauled system I’ve comodored.

It seems my mighty creator has overlooked the obvious: This was probably a fraymotif technique.

“Oh,” says Dirk.

“Oh!” says Jake.

“The hell is a fraymotif?” asks Oracle.

Damara mumbles something under her breath while cleaning around her claws with a hairpin.

“Were you even paying attention in that epic you made us recite?” Vriska snaps from where she’s lying on the floor with an arm over her eyes, trying to rest them after being awake for 16 hours. “We used them repeatedly in the end battles.”
“The thing where you combine powers, right?” says Starfire. “So the Page gives Hope to the guy with Heart ability, and you’re able to pull people into this universe from a universe that supposedly no longer exists?”

Or, possibly, recreate them.

Congratulations on not being the only one having an existential fucking crisis.

“Dude, I created you last time, too,” Dirk snaps.

And at what point post-creation was I not facing a philosophical quandary of the existential and potentially critical variety?

Dirk starts to argue back, but Roxy puts a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, not now, okay?” she asks quietly. “We need to focus.”

Rose frowns, “What AR-Hal says does ring true, but something is… off.”

“Agreef,” Terezi says around a mouthful of Calliope’s borrowed tablet. “I don’ hink wuh sood - Hey!” Terezi grabs for the tablet Vriska so cruelly yanked from her mouth.

“It can’t honestly be taking you that long to read the AI’s text,” Vriska snaps. “This is about your weird red fetish, isn’t it?”

“There’s nothing cherry red in jail!” Terezi whines loudly, grasping for the tablet kept out of reach by the lankier spider-troll. “I have been deprived and am in withdrawal!”

Dave snorts in amusement. “Heart you, too, Bear Trap,” he teases, and Karkat immediately facepalms.

Terezi stops play-wrestling with Vriska, and the two of them turn to him with confused (Terezi) and horrified (Vriska) expressions. “What?” asks Terezi. Behind them, Damara has suddenly taken an interest in the situation.

Dave ducks his head slightly and scowls. “Jesus, Pyrope, ever hear of sarcasm? So I forgot fake-flirting was forbidden by the Troll Code. Sue me.”

“Dave…” Karkat warns.

“Of course, I know sarcasm. I can smell your sarcasm from a mile away,” Terezi says, offended that her abilities would be put in doubt. “That wasn’t sarcasm. You meant it.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did!” Terezi insists.

“How the hell do you forget which troll you’re dating?” Vriska demands, a small rattle starting from somewhere in her chest.


“Dave!” Karkat snaps.

“I think maybe she’s upset because you used to date?” John suggests helpfully.

“We never made that mistake except in the retco - GASP!” Terezi turns back to Dave, jabbing a
finger in his direction. “You remember the retconned timeline!” she accuses.


“Only because I joined minds with my ghost before the last battle!” Terezi counters. “You don’t have that ability. You shouldn’t anyway.”

“It could be related to aspect,” Rose suggests. “How long has this been happening?”

“Increasingly, since we got here,” Karkat answers for him. “First as vaguely remembered dreams, then clearer dreams, and now memories jumbled in with the real ones.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” asks Rose, voice carefully non-judgmental. Clinical.

It puts Dave's teeth on edge. “Because I didn't want to be your patient or lab rat?” he bites out a little sharper than he meant to.

Hurt flashes across her face, but then she turns her attention to Karkat, features unjudging again, and he won't feel guilty he won't. “And you, too, Karkat?” she asks. Karkat nods. “And it’s not just the retconned timeline, is it? It's the other lives, too. Kankri and the Sufferer.” Again, Karkat nods. “Me, too,” she admits, and Dave's stomach churns with the guilt he tried to hold back. She turns to the larger group. “Anyone else?”

Kanaya shakes her head. Jade too. John remembers the other timeline only because he was there, but no other lives. Roxy has no extra memory, nor do Jane, Jake, or Calliope. Sollux and Vriska both dismiss the question as stupid, and then appear deeply uncomfortable at having shared an opinion. Terezi admits that she isn’t sure, but she might be remembering Redglare. Aradia doesn't answer because she has fallen asleep again. Dirk, however, is glowering guiltily at the floor.

“Dirk?” asks Roxy.

“I kind of hoped they weren't what they felt like. That they were just bad dreams,” he mumbles.

“What are we going to do about this?” Nightwing asks, not that he actually expects answers.

“It's a bit of a wild guess,” says Rose, “but perhaps, if we can succeed in bringing back our alternate selves, the memories will settle back in with their proper minds. Though memories of the retconned timeline will have to remain, as we cannot bring back out people who are already here - ourselves.”

“You want to bring all nearly 200 Daves over?” Dave asks, staring at her like she has suddenly sprouted Kanaya's horns.

Rose deflates. “… No, I suppose that would be unreasonable.”

“But it isn't all of them, right?” Karkat asks him. “The ones you tell me about are the same few deaths over and over.”

Dave frowns, thinking. “Yeah, maybe,” he admits.

“Which few?” asks Terezi.

Dave sighs. It doesn't take much effort to remember. “Getting stabbed by Bec Noir and Bec Blanc…”

John scowls. “That was the pre-retcon timeline,” he says.
“Getting cut up by just Bec Noir just before Bro attacks him…”

“Davesprite didn’t die from that, but I can see why it would stick out,” says Rose.

“And the cherry on top is Her Inferior Fishtits skewering me with my own sword.”

A lull falls over the group as they think. “When the hell did you even have the opening to go against her?” Vriska demands.

“Man, I have no idea,” Dave admits. “It didn't resemble any part of the game I know.”

“Because it happened on post-Condescension earth,” says Dirk. He's still not looking to any of them and especially not at Dave.

“Oh, right, Alpha Dave,” says Dave. “Yeah, I guess that matches up.”

“So… do we want to try it?” Jake asks Dirk, not sure how to read the situation.

“No,” Terezi and Rose say at the same time. Then, Rose expands, “As was stated earlier, something seems off about that particular fray motif. As though what worked for Hal won't be enough for the others. I don't want us to take the risk unless the outcome looks fortuitous.”

Dave shrugs. “Well, I could-”

“NO!!” say Rose, Terezi, and Vriska.

“Hell, Strider, we already have to deal with the empress! Why would you actually think that we want the entire rest of the fucked up timeline we barely escaped to come along for the ride?” Vriska demands.

“Okay, then who?” he asks, exasperated.

“Well, um,” Calliope says quietly. “I've actually been thinking about it while you were discussing… other things. And I think, well, maybe we've been thinking about the nature of the void session wrongly?”

“How do you mean?” asks Rip, suddenly much more interested in the conversation.

“Well, we've been thinking of it as a session where nothing happens, simply lucky that the pre-scratch session from the beta game was able to add in their own planets and tadpole,” Calliope explains. “But, if you think about it, non-existence is defined by existence, and vice versa. I think… I think there always had to be a void session for the doomed session. Not just because it was destined by the timeline established by my brother, but because there is no time and space - much less light and blood and mind and all the other things - without a void within which to define themselves as not-void.”

“Okay, that's some nice philosophy, but what does it have to do with anything at all?” Booster Gold asks.

“Well, if you think about it, the God powers of the void session match up exactly with what is needed to define existence,” Calliope explains. “The Prince of Heart to grab hold of souls, the Rogue of Void to tear away their non-existence, the Maid of Life to give them life again, and the Page of Hope to power the impossible.”

All eyes turn to the four in question. Dirk raises an eyebrow to Jake, who shrugs and looks to Jane.
She shrugs as well and turns to Roxy, who is vibrating like an overeager puppy who is trying desperately to pretend it is capable of sitting still long enough to get the treat. She grins hopefully toward Rose.

Rose grins back and says, “We're doing it, man.”

“WE’RE MAKING IT HAPPEN!” Terezi declares giddily. The room breaks out into cheers and worries and strategizing. Dave hears none of it. All he can think about is finally being able to repay Davesprite.

“The universe… is a frog… bred by Jade Harley… in an extrauniversal apocalypse-inducing video game,” says Question as he looks over the document before him. “Huh.”

“Not out loud,” Black Canary warns sharply as she elbows him in the side. “Not everyone is reading that part.”

“This is obvious idiocy,” Hawkman snarls, dropping his own tablet to the table in disgust. “I don't know why you're trusting these miscreants to tell you the truth about how they got here. They've done nothing but deliberately cause trouble since they arrived.”

Green Arrow holds out his hand to Batman. “I never took that bet,” Batman reminds him. “Look, whether you want to believe how they got here or not, Meenah Piexes is a problem. She's the reason a baking company got involved in the technology industry, and quickly excelled to top of its field. Batwoman has found evidence of bribes, cover-ups, and disappearances. It also appears that several villains are receiving stipends from Crocker subsidiaries, and the disturbing part is that they all have a single theme.”

“Clowns and comedians?” says Kyle Rayner as he looks over the data. “You think she's funding the Joker?”

Batwoman shrugs. “She's funding Harley Quinn, Prankster, and several others, but I haven't been able to find a direct tie to Joker. However, it seems that targets he has chosen due to incredibly lax security for a Gotham business were all Crocker-funded.”

“Great,” says Flash, rubbing his forehead wearily. “The last thing we need is an alien empress taking Quinn’s place as #1 Joker fan.”

“Actually, based her psychological profile, I don't think that's what she's doing,” says Batwoman. “She seems to find them endearing but have no personal relationship to them. They're more like pets than allies, and I'm guessing that attitude is why Joker hasn't accepted any direct offers. His ego is too big. The one we have to watch out for is Gamzee Makara.”

Batwoman taps something on her tablet and two pictures pop up on the screen at one end of the room. One is a drawing by Calliope based on the trolls’ descriptions, and the other is a still from when Gamzee had escaped Vriska's sylladex. “On the left is a depiction of a troll called the Grand Highblood. He was the Alternian version of Kurloz Makara, a purple blood with an ability to impose severe anxiety, daymares, nightmares, and general terror upon the mind. Notice the clown makeup he shares with Gamzee Makara, on the right. This is because they are both members of an organization called the Subjugglators, not only a religion revolving around murder and mayhem and the end of the universe but also a vital part of their legal system.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” says Cyborg.

“Unfortunately, no,” says Batwoman. She throws up another slide, this one a helpful chart designed
by Hal and featuring a photo of Terezi in cosplay. “The way it worked was this: criminal acts were
defined as acts against the orders of the empress, against the interests of the empress, against the life
of the empress, against the interests of the Alternian empire, or against the propagation of the troll
species. These acts included but were not limited to: critique of the empress, critique of the social
order, attempted or successful murder of a troll of higher blood status, disobedience toward a troll of
higher blood status, failing to contribute genetic material to the mothergrubs, evading
the investigation of a legislacerator, piracy of royal goods, evading conscription, failing to cull the weak
and the mutated, etc.

“Once accusations of a crime were made, they would be investigated by a legislacerator. If the
legislacerator believed the accused innocent, they would seek the guilty party, usually the original
accuser. Once the legislacerator had found the guilty party, if that person was of blood status lower
than or within one degree of the legislacerator’s own, the legislacerator was permitted to kill the
guilty party. If the guilty party was of higher status or was too powerful to be killed so simply or
needed to be made an example of, they were hauled before the Grand Highblood. There, the
legislacerator made their case, the accused made their own case, and the Grand Highblood decided
guilt or innocence. If you were found innocent, you were usually killed anyway for wasting
everyone's time by looking guilty. If you were found guilty, you then had to engage in trial by humor
- if you could make the Grand Highblood laugh, you were free to go.”

“How could a society like that possibility function?” Fire demands.

“I don't think it does,” says Question. He scratches at the jawline of his otherwise featureless face as
he peers at the display thoughtfully. “Actually, I don't think it's meant to. She shows almost no
interest in her planet unless an usurpation is taking place, and even leaves all of the children
completely unattended with the exception of their monster guardians. Her best friend was this
asshole, her fuckbuddy was the ship's tortured engine/pilot, and her mom was a doomsday device.
But when her lusus was killing off all the trolls, she tried to make it back in time to stop it. When she
was given the void session earth, she did everything in her power to try to remake it into a troll
planet. She may not empathize for the individuals or even bother to learn what a common good
actually is, but she feels entitled to a mass of lives. No one is allowed to endanger trolls because they
all belong to her. At the same time, she holds no reverence for them. Pleas for pity are probably her
number one source of entertainment. But they’re hers, and in that way she is fiercely loyal, as one
might be to a pet. I’m guessing she's the reason Amanda Waller has gone into hiding, and Bronze
Tiger and Nightshade have turned up dead?”

“Yes,” says Batwoman. “I'm still trying to find the others who cooperated in the theft of the matriorb
to ensure their safety, but—”

“Excuse me,” Raven says, suddenly appearing at the head of the room in a cloud of smoke. “But Dr.
Mid-Nite, your assistance is required in Observation 4.”

“Where the children were left?” he asks, surprised. “What could they need so immediately?”

“They tested their ability to bring another friend back,” Raven explained calmly. “He's currently
hemorrhaging from two serious wounds.”

Dr. Mid-Nite swears under his breath and makes a run for the door.

“Hawkman, Hawkgirl,” Raven continues, “the boy is not Thanagarian, but he has wings, one of
which has been severed. Your knowledge of such appendages may be useful.”

Hawkgirl and Hawkman exchange confused glances but then quickly excuse themselves and hurry
out.
Raven turns to the larger group. “I must go and do what I can to keep the calm. But I thought some of you would like to know that it seems the power supplies of these young universal gods are, in fact, exhaustible and require occasional recuperation periods.” She disappears at that in another puff of smoke.

“Well, that's not ominous at all,” says Donna Troy.
“You can’t call *dibs* on a *person.*”

“Can and did. Dibs.”

“This is ridiculous. You’re ridiculous, and it astounds me that you were ever prior allowed care of a younger person, much less that you expect to be allowed such again.”

“You really think a *warmonger* has any right to speak on - ?”

“Gentlemen, would you please cease this discussion and agree that our primary concerns are first the boy’s well-being and secondly his *consent*?”

“He’s waking up.”

Davesprite groans and rubs his eyes. Something hard is pressing into his side and something soft against his chest. He tries to sit up, but he doesn’t move. What the fuck? Is he paralyzed? No, he just moved his hand. He is at least not paralyzed in that one arm. The other arm is pinned to his side by the wall that’s pressing into him. The hell is going on?

Something huge and winged and armored steps in front of him to speak, and Davesprite flies back in surprise, trying to gain distance on the enemy so he can evaluate his next move. Or, at least, he tries to. What he actually ends up doing is falling to the hard tile floor with an indignant squawk.

Huh, he was lying on a bed? That’s weird. It seems the soft thing was a body pillow keeping him from rolling onto his chest or back. Also armor guy has no dog face and also might be a chick? What the fuck?

Several adults rush to his side with shouts of alarm, one of them telling off the thing that had surprised him. They’re all dressed in fucking ridiculous costumes. He will never again tease anyone about their stupid princely poof-shorts. Oh, right!

“Where’s Dirk?” he demands, pushing the adults away as he tries to sit up on his… legs? The fuckity *fucking* FUCK?! “GUYS??!!!!!!”
At the other side of the room, where he can’t see past the bulky medical bed (WHAT THE FUCK), comes the hissing noise of a door, and someone saying “Not all at once!” Then a more familiar voice goes, “Oooop! Haha, in first!”, runs across the room, and jumps onto the bed to peer down at him.


“Hi, Mom,” says Davesprite, already starting to calm down. If Roxy is here and happy, then his friends are safe. Everyone is fine. Probably. “Question: What the fuck?”

Roxy pulls her feet under her to sit cross-legged on the bed above him. “Okay, so do you know DC Comics? Like, with Batman and shit?”

“Batman and shit,” grumbles the man standing several feet away dressed like Robin Hood.

Roxy smiles brightly back at Robin Hood and tells him, “If you don’t give our poor Davesprite some breathing room, I’ll tell Black Canary on you, ’kay?”

Robin Hood steps back.

Davesprite looks back and forth between them. That sounded like… But it couldn’t… Unless…

“Did Jade comics-theme the new universe?” he asks.

“Haha! I knew you were the smart one!” she says. She leans forward and ruffles his hair while Dave’s voice objects from a short distance away. So Dave and Roxy are both alive. Maybe one day Davesprite will find out about everyone else, too. “We’re in the Justice League Watchtower’s medical bay. It turns out that when a damaged sprite gets fleshified, the damage isn’t auto-healed. Who knew!”

Damage? Davesprite looks down and sees his stomach is gauzed up and bleeding through a little. He reaches back and… yep. One and a half wings. He could have sworn…

She pauses to drop the exaggerated cheeriness and asks sincerely, “You okay?”

Davesprite doesn’t feel equipped to answer that question, so instead he calls out, “Hey, copycat, what are you doing hiding all the way over there?”

“What the fuck are you doing on the floor, man?” Dave answers back.

“Dude, gravity is hard. Don’t judge,” Davesprite counters. And then, “It’s hard and nobody understands.” Because he can. It does, in fact, get a snicker of amusement out of Dave. Experimentally, Davesprite tries to move his wings. The whole one is pretty much strapped in place to prevent him from damaging it further. The other is still stumpy.

Roxy frowns. “Did you godtier before you sprited?” she asks.

“Nah, godtiering is for assholes,” he says. Then, “Wait, you guys can fly here?”

“Yes!”

“Unfair!” he objects. “I’m the one with the wings!”

“Let’s see if we can get you to figure out gravity first before you go breaking it,” says another adult. Davesprite looks up toward the bed behind him to see someone who looks like they might be a superhero or might be a cult member. He isn’t sure. “If you think you’re calm enough now, I’d like to get you back onto the bed for an examination.”
“Well, okay, but you’ll have to buy me dinner first.”

The Amazing Cult-Man is not amused. He gestures toward Davesprite’s belly. “You have clearly split your stitches, and I, for one, think you have lost enough blood today. Let’s not lose more.”

Roxy hops off the bed next to Davesprite and holds out a hand to help him up. “We should listen to Dr. Mid-Nite,” she tells him gently. “He really knows his stuff!”

“Wait, that guy is a doctor?” Davesprite demands. “Jade, what the fuck did you do?”

“IT’S NOT MY FAULT! MY SPRITE WAS TOO BUSY CRYING TO WARN ME ABOUT THESE THINGS!” Jade calls back. Oh shit, she’s actually here. Now what?

Roxy is still holding out her hand patiently. With no other options, Davesprite takes it and attempts to pull himself up.

And then he screams.

“OUT!” Dr. Mid-Nite orders immediately. “Everyone out except Hawkgirl and Jane! Roxy, out! Hawkgirl, help me lift him.”

Davesprite tries to object to his mom - to Roxy leaving, but he can’t think about anything except the way his stomach feels like it is suddenly on fire. He doesn’t even notice Mid-Nite and Hawkgirl lifting him until he’s already on the bed again. Nope, exam table. Whatever.

Jane presses her hands into his side. They’re soft and cool and ease his pain, and he very nearly coos over it. Luckily, he’s too out of it to be embarrassed. “The internal bleeding is back again but not hemorrhaging. I think I can reseal it myself.”

“I won’t close the stitches if you only think you can stave off the bleeding,” Mid-Nite chastises. He’s currently removing the stitches that had torn open. Davesprite regrets glancing down. The gaping wound in his stomach seemed much more minor when it was just orange pixels.

Actually, it’s not orange, but it is the wrong shade of brown. When he had skin, he used to be pretty dark. Especially if he actually got out into the sun much (which he usually did, thanks to Bro). Now, he’s like… sienna? Is that what this color is called? It’s a human brown, but it’s on the copper end of the spectrum, like an old penny.

He lifts his hand and sees that while his body seems mostly human, there are an increasing number of leather ridges running down his arms which turn hard and scaly about halfway between wrist and elbow. The digits are definitely more like talons than fingers, ending in claws instead of fingernails. The skin there is pretty fucking bright orange.

He reaches for his face to check for a beak when Hawkgirl grabs his wrist and pulls it down out of the way of Jane and the Doc. “Hey, focus,” she says sharply. “Do you remember your name?”

“Davesprite isn’t a name,” he grumbles.

She frowns but appears to accept the answer. “This will be over soon,” she tells him factually.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it,” says Jane.

“You think?” snaps Mid-Nite.

“I’ve got it!”
Then Mid-Nite starts stitching Davesprite back together again, and Davesprite dumps out his entire reservoir of swear words.

“So,” Dave says dropping into the seat across from the bed. Dammit, how could he tell Davesprite was awake? “How y’ doin’?”

“Let’s see,” Davesprite says, refusing to actually open his eyes and look at Dave on principle. That’s what you get for ignoring a man’s honest efforts to pretend to be asleep. “I’m bed-bound in a strange place full of strange people who empathize for me like I’m a three-footed bunny rabbit. I’m still 13. Like fuck that whole ‘that’s the age you died at’ thing; I lived just as long as you. Technically, longer. Okay, maybe not with the time travel, but close enough. And like, I finally get legs back, and I still don’t have a dick? That’s some real bullshit. Also red hair? Dude, you shoulda left me dead. I’d rather be dead than ginger.”

“Wait, what about your dick?”

Davesprite scowls and runs a hand - Talon? Foot? What even is birdman anatomy? - down his face. Of course, that’s what Dave latched onto. It’s what he would have. Might as well have it out. At least Dave would never embarrass him over it. “Remember how Seppucrow tried to build a nest?” he asks.

“... I’m pretty sure boy crows have nests?” says Dave, obviously catching on. Davesprite can hear him shift his weight uncomfortably. That’s what you get, asshole. “I mean, I don’t know. They were never one of the things I cared about before, and - ”

“It tried to hatch the egg, Dave.”

Dave sighs heavily. There’s an undercurrent of guilt in his voice that Davesprite chooses to ignore when he says, “So you’re telling me you have a birdgina now.”

“I know you know it’s called a cloaca, and thank god, no.” He will not blush over that. Dave is the one that should be embarrassed. “Getting a human one seems to the compromise reached by the universal powers. Which is you, by the way, oh god of the new universe.”

“Hey, I just suggested we start with you! I didn’t actually do it!” Dave objects. “You want to complain, take it up with our parents. Are you blind?”

“What?” Davesprite laughs.

“You won’t open your eyes.”

“I don’t want to burn my retinas out with your ugly face.”

“It’s your ugly face, too.”

“Not anymore.”

“...True.”

“Also you did not age well.”

“Man, fuck you,” Dave laughs. Then, “Wait, if that’s how it works, then did Jade - ?”

Davesprite grins wickedly. “You know what, you should definitely ask her that!”
Dave makes a choking noise.

Davesprite finally opens his eyes to make a grab for Dave’s shades and is surprised when he gets away with it. Dave probably didn’t expect him to do that. “Here, let me ask her for y - The fuck?” he demands angrily. “These are just regular shades!”

Dave laughs at him. “Hey, those are one of a kind Stiller shades, fuck you.”

“What the hell is this crazy topsy-turvy universe where a man can’t use a chat client on his eyewear?!” Davesprite demands as Dave continues laughing at him.

“Chill, I still have iShades in my sylladex,” Dave assures him. “I just don’t wear them all the time.” He plucks his back off Davesprite’s face. “The iShades can get too distracting.”

“Can I have your iShades, then?”

“Man, no, you came through with your own probably.”

“Yeah, but it means more if I steal them from you.”

“Fuck off, asshole.” Dave frowns at him, growing serious again, and asks, “So is it just me, or did you, in the brief time I saw you before you tripped and fell into another sprite, have two wings? That thing grew back? Isn’t it supposed to be here?”

Davesprite shrugs. “If I’m not Davepeta, ya’ll must’ve pulled on an earlier memory,” he guesses. "Might be why I'm 13."

“Well, yeah, of course we reached for Davesprite instead of Davepeta!” Dave laughs. “Why would we force you into that unholy abomination?”

Davesprite plucks a loose feather from his left wing. It's the same copper-orange color as his hair. “Right,” he says.

“Sorry for pulling on the unhealed version, though,” Dave says more seriously. “That’s shitty, man. If I’d realized… I dunno. Woulda worked on getting the details exact, I guess.”

Davesprite doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say to that, so he lies. “Whatever. It’s fine.”

Roxy visits Davesprite in his Watchtower hospital room every day. So do Rose and Jade. Jade doesn’t seem to realize this should be awkward. She doesn’t remember them having a relationship and a breakup, so Davesprite doesn’t bring it up. Her hugs are still soft and warm and nice. Dave visits every other day, because the asshole is trying to pretend he doesn’t care but also has unfortunately impeccable timing. Karkat usually visits when Dave does, but things are awkward now since they don’t really know each other, so Dave does most of the talking. John comes by when he’s not with the Titans, which is not often, but, as much as Davesprite misses him, the boy does not understand the concept of “No, I have not finished healing yet.” Fucking gods, man.

Jane helps Dr. Mid-Nite when she isn’t busy being an ass-kicking vigilante. (Bonus of vaginas: no awkward boners in medical settings because your friends’ ecto-parents are hot.) Jake checks in occasionally, but again, they don’t actually know each other.

Dirk never stops by, but Davesprite does occasionally glance toward the door and swear that he sees a millisecond of blurred color where someone had been standing. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking.
Davesprite doesn’t want to be called Davesprite anymore. He’s not a sprite anymore, and he’s not a Dave anymore. But he can’t think of anything better so he rolls with it. On one particularly annoying day, when Rose wheedles this confession out of him, he jokingly insists that he be referred to by his true bird name: Cra-CAW. Rose, because she’s an asshole, loyally beats that horse corpse into its atomic components. Hawkman doesn’t think it’s funny, so Davesprite doesn’t ask her to stop.

After a couple weeks, Davesprite/Cra-CAW finally whines his way into physical therapy. The Thanagarians are put in charge of it, of course. Seems totally sensible. Surely, they know what condition birdpeople need to be in.

Except they keep forgetting he can’t fly. By day three, the arguments have escalated to screaming, and Davesprite throws a five pound weight (god, using that makes him feel like a baby) at Hawkman, who nearly decks him except for the grace of Hawkgirl, who breaks up the fight. Hawkman decides soon afterward that he really is not meant for the mentorship thing, which is fine, that’s not what Davesprite wanted anyway, he just wanted to not be stuck in bed. Hawkgirl sticks around and keeps training him because she’s made of tougher stuff and doesn’t actually care about his little fits of frustration, but it’s pretty clear they’re not well matched, either.

One wing doesn’t make you a real bird.

Davesprite is kind of surprised when Robin Hood Green Arrow starts showing up to Davesprite's PT sessions. He spends one day observing, two days correcting Hawkgirl on her approach, and by day four, he’s handling Davesprite by himself. He’s actually surprisingly good at it.

“Thought any more about the name?” Green Arrow asks one day while supervising Davesprite’s stretches.

“Huh?” says Davesprite. Have his friends been gossiping?

“Rose has been calling you bird noises for a month, and Hawkgirl claims it’s because of a conversation about your name,” says Green Arrow. “If I’m being nosey, I’ll drop it.”

“Nah, it’s no big,” he says. “I just can’t think of anything else. Everyone else is comfortable with Davesprite.”

Green Arrow rolls his eyes. “Screw what other people are comfortable with. It’s your name,” he says. “You’ve stretched enough. Do one sit up and tell me how it feels.”

With a sigh, Davesprite lays back, curls his knees into position, and puts his hands next to but not under his head. He attempts to sit up and mostly succeeds in curling his shoulders an iota and exhausting himself. He wants to say his name is Davepeta, but that’s not remotely true either. What he says instead is, “It’s difficult, but it doesn’t hurt.”

Green Arrow nods. “Alright, I’ll talk to Mid-Nite about adding in abdominal exercises. For now, leg presses again.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Davesprite chirps. He sits up and allows Green Arrow to give him a hand in standing. He’s better with legs and gravity now, but the wing issue still throws off his balance. Because they’re avoiding overtaxing his stomach and wing stump, they haven’t done as much upper body exercise and almost no full body and balance. He hasn’t run in the month he’s been here. Kind of a shitty Strider if you can’t run.

“It has to have four letters.”

Green Arrow looks up from where he was marking something on his tablet. “What?” he asks.
Davesprite shrugs awkwardly and doesn’t look at Green Arrow directly. “Dave, Rose, John, Jade… They all have four letters,” he says. “If I change my name, I don’t want it to be some lame-ass five or six letter one.”

Green Arrow quirks a smile, probably guessing that Davesprite knows his name has five or six letters. “What about three?” he suggests.

“Ew,” Davesprite says as blandly as possible, face blank.

Green Arrow snorts at that. “Okay, I’ll hit up the pregnancy section of the bookstore and get you a baby name book,” he says, returning his attention to whatever he was doing.

“How aboutformal power through a military strategy or a political one. The choice can significantly influence the outcome of the game. The strategies involved in the game can be influenced by various factors, such as the terrain, weather, or the type of units available. The main objective is to conquer the opponent’s territory and establish control over it. This game encourages critical thinking, strategic planning, and problem-solving skills. Players can choose from a variety of units, each with unique abilities and strengths, to form their strategy. The game starts with a small area that gradually expands as the player gains more resources and power. The player must balance resource gathering, unit production, and military engagement to succeed.

“Sweet,” says Davesprite. He heads over to the leg press machine.

He is actually surprised when, the next day, Green Arrow starts their session by dropping a baby name book in his lap.

“A rook is a bird?” Davesprite asks suddenly one day while reading in the Watchtower's secondary observatory with Rose. (He wonders exactly what occasion calls for so much superhero stargazing that a second observatory is occasionally necessary.) She’s reading something unintelligible ganked from Raven’s private library, and he’s reading the baby name book Green Arrow gave him. They’re curled up on opposite sides of a couch Rose snuck up there in her sylladex.

Rose glances up at him with a raised eyebrow. “Yes?” she says. “It’s related to crows and ravens and has a somewhat similar appearance. I think it might be smaller, though I’m not sure.”

“Huh.” His fingers trace over the page. *Rook Strider.* No, that sounds dumb. “I thought it was a chess piece. I don’t know which one; it just sounded like a chess piece.”

“It is a chess piece, too,” says Rose. “It’s the tower.”

“I thought that was the knight.”

“No, the knight is the horse.”

“Right, right.” Davesprite looks down at his book again. “So I suppose it’s the shitty piece on the board?”

“Actually, a rook is often considered more powerful and thus more valuable than a knight.”

Davesprite glances up again. “Really?”

Rose looks amused. “Yes, really.”

*Rook Leijon.* No, that sounds dumb too, and people will ask questions. *Rook Lalonde.* Hm. Maybe, but that seems to be asking to be called a girl now. He doesn’t always feel like a “he,” but he hasn’t felt like a “she” even once since his incarnation. *Rook Sprite.*

Huh.

“Hey, Rose, what do you think of ‘Rook Sprite’?”

She glances up, frowning. “I thought you wanted to drop the -sprite?” she asks.

“Rook Strider sounds weird,” he explains.
“Oh, as a surname?” she says. She seems to consider. “Rook Sprite…” She turns to him again with a smile. “It does rather suit you, doesn’t it?”

Chapter End Notes

To be super clear: The speakers at the beginning are Hawkman, Green Arrow, Hawkman again, Green Arrow again, Dr. Mid-Nite, and then Hawkgirl. Additionally, the reason Davesprite initially thinks he's paralyzed is because he tries to sit up by floating instead of by using his muscles. I have no idea how medically accurate any of this is; just roll with it.
“I keep missing!” Blue Beetle shouts over the communicator as another shot goes wild. “How do I keep missing?!” And now he’s distracted by trying to get the fire hydrant shut off.

“She’s a probability manipulator!” Red Robin shouts back. “She- ARG!” He dodges a swipe of Serket’s sword. Her tactic for dealing with Kid Flash’s tornado of attacks has been to ignore him, focusing on Red Robin and Blue Beetle so that he is often forced to give up his attacks to defend his friends. “Didn’t you read the profile?”

“... No,” Blue Beetle admits. “Is that magic? The scarab isn’t great with magic.”

“We’re not sure how it reads. The magic-users won’t get back to us,” says Red Robin. “Switch with Wondergirl and help Heir of Breath against Pyrope.”

“I lost Pyrope and Heir of Breath, actually,” Wondergirl says. She sails into the air not far from them so they can get her bearing.

Red Robin swears under his breath. “Wondergirl backup Kid Flash. Blue Beetle, I’m with you - get air, look for a read on Heir of Breath and Pyrope.”

Wonder Girl dives down already twirling her lasso, Blue Beetle sails upward for perspective, and Red Robin takes off in the general direction he had last seen John and Pyrope. “Okay, I see their heat signatures!” Blue Beetle announces. “Right at the next- yeah. Okay left again in two blocks, and then they’re about five blocks down.”

“You mean five blocks up,” Red Robin grumbles. God, he hates being the only one on the team who has to take San Francisco by non-powered foot. Well, there’s always the grappling hook, but there’s no point to running across only and handful of roofs. It’s the only city Tim has ever lived in where any given location actually is probably going to be uphill both ways.

Blue Beetle lands before he gets there, obviously, and hurries in, but by the time Red Robin gets there, Blue Beetle is helping Heir of Breath haul Pyrope back out into the street in handcuffs. She’s grinning her shark-toothed smile, teal-colored blood smeared across her face. There’s also a small spattering of red blood. John looks like he’s been attacked by a feral cat, with rips down the back of his shirt, his hood misplaced, a bloody nose, a split lip, and... bite marks down his neck. There’s also quite a lot of smears of teal across his face and neck.

Red Robin stops in his tracks. “Really?” he demands. John has the decency to blush vibrantly, Pyrope looks incredibly proud of herself, and Blue Beetle glances between them, confused. Blue Beetle did not grow up having to deal with Bruce and Selina.

“Shut up,” John grumbles. “Let’s just get her to jail.”

“Why would I go to jail?” Pyrope asks with exaggerated innocence, punctuated by a malicious giggle.
“Why?” John demands angrily. “Because you were… uh…” He deflates and turns to Red Robin. “What was she doing?”

Red Robin shrugged. “They were running away from the high-value shops,” he says. “You didn’t find anything on her?”

“No,” John admits. “But I don’t know what she’s got captchalogue.”

“Uh, scarab just checked,” says Blue Beetle. “There still haven’t been any robberies reported.”

Pyrope grins broadly. “That’s because we didn’t rob anyone!” she chirps delightedly. “We wanted to see how smart your team actually is, so we went to the bank and then ran away from it to see what would happen. Which is not a crime! Nor is self-defense from vigilantes!” She grins up at Blue Beetle. “Damage to public property, however, is a crime with a minimum sentence of paying for the repairs and usually community service, which does not include time served as a vigilante.”

Blue Beetle blinks at her, looking suddenly terrified. “Uh…”

“This is also an illegal detainment!” she informs them. “You’re not actually authorized to arrest people because you are, as stated, vigilantes. It’s just that you’re helpful vigilantes so the cops look the other way, and the people you detain either don’t know better or don’t give a shit or have lawyers who don’t give a shit. However, continued detainment after you have been informed of the lack of criminal action can be constituted as - ”

“We absolutely have every right to be suspicious of you,” Red Robin argues. “You are a violent criminal.”

Pyrope pauses, then turns toward him with the glee of an alligator before a limping gazelle. “Technically, so are you.”

Red Robin has to hold back from saying some things that Batman would not approve of since, given her whole lawyer schtick, he wouldn’t put it past her to carry a voice-recorder. “I’ll let you go if you prove you haven’t got any stolen goods in your sylladex.”

“Uh…” says John.

“You actually don’t have any right to demand that, but because I’m such an upstanding citizen, I’ll comply!”

“No, wait!” John objects too late as her sylladex explodes all over them.

By the time they’re back on their feet and clear of all the stuffed animals and ropes, Pyrope has disappeared. Wonder Girl and Kid Flash report the same regarding Serket.

“I thought you had enhanced healing,” Kara says, bringing over the first aid kit to John on the couch as he continues to fail to resist scratching at the forming scabs on his face.

“Doesn’t seem like it,” John grumbles. Kara lightly slaps his hand away from his face so she can help clean it, but the second she returns her attention to the kit, John is scratching again.

“According to Mid-Nite’s profile, Egbert exhibits slightly speedier healing, but at the high end of the unpowered human spectrum,” Rose Wilson says, reading off her tablet as she sprawls across an entire loveseat in the Tower’s common room. “Nothing to brag about. What’s more important is his durability and endurance. He’s difficult to damage and can take a lot of damage without being out of
the game. He can also avoid damage by dissipating his form. However, if he dies unheroically and unjustly, he will resurrect completely undamaged. Death by suffocation due to makeout probably does not count as either.”

“I WASN’T MAKING OUT WITH HER!” John objects, and Kara yanks on his chin to force him to face her again.

“You have teeth marks on your mouth,” Kara points out as she dabs at said wounds with an alcohol-infused cotton ball. John immediately tries to squirm away like the big baby he is, but there’s no escaping a determined Kryptonian.

“THAT’S ENTIRELY HER FAULT.”

Tim scowls up at them from his own seat in the corner where he’s trying to type up a report. “Are you saying you weren’t consenting?” he asks. “Because we can still - ”

“No, I’m not… uugh,” John groans. His face is roughly tomato-colored. He’s actually quiet for a moment, which Kara takes advantage of in getting the antiseptic cream onto his face before moving on to the worse wounds. “I’m not accusing her of anything; I just think the whole thing is stupid. Can we not talk about it?”

Tim and Rose exchange glances. Yeah, they’d been making out. “Sure, bud,” Tim says, returning to his report. Very professionally, Tim types in Heir of Breath then proceeded to totally not make out with combatant Terezi Pyrope in a warehouse while unobserved by the team. “So you didn’t blow her away, then?”

“I’m going to punch you the second Kara lets go of me,” John growls.

“You didn’t sweep her off her feet?”

“Shut up!” John squeals. “I’m with Roxy!”

“Yeah, Roxy is also with Jane Crocker and Calliope, so that doesn’t actually mean anything,” Kara reminds him.

Rose glances up with a raised eyebrow, but then decides she doesn’t care and returns her attention to her tablet. “Drake, I’ve got the records for Pyrope and Serket. It seems they were released after pursuit of criminal charges was deemed costly and unnecessary, as well as opening the state of California to potential inhumane detainment charges as Pyrope and Serket were each being kept in isolation for prolonged periods of time.”

“What about the hanging?” Tim demanded.

“The only witnesses to that were Green Arrow and Black Canary, who cannot testify in court without revealing their identities, and the hitman in question who 1) is disinterested and 2) isn’t a reliable or sympathetic witness in the first place. It also falls into the gray area of criminal versus justifiable vigilante action, and the district attorney has decided she wants absolutely nothing to do with that debate.”

Tim groans and tosses his tablet aside on the coffee table. “Great,” he says. “Now we have to deal with them.”

“Ostensibly, there’s nothing to ‘deal with,’” Rose points out. “They are behaving just as they claimed to you: minor chaos but no criminal acts. There are reports of vigilante acts by the Scourge Sisters all along the East Coast, but they’ve dialed it back quite a bit. They’re actually less violent and less
“You have to be kidding me!” John objects. “They’re all about chaos and violence.”

“Well, as Ms. Lalonde pointed out last month, I think there’s a reason they’re choosing to be careful,” Kara says. “Worse comes to worse, they’re either dealing with a prison sentence or having to leave earth.”


Tim rolls his eyes. Of course, John never actually read the discussion Kara was referring to. “John, they’re technically undocumented immigrants,” he tells him. “Ever since Superman admitted to being alien, the US has had a policy of either turning a blind eye to space aliens or making the residence process easier, but criminal charges make it a lot more difficult. They got off easy with the DA deciding she doesn’t want to deal with it anymore, but they might not be so lucky nex - ” And then he realizes what he just said. “God dammit, Serket rigged the system!”

“Yeah, probably,” Rose says.

John huffs. “I’m gonna punch them in the face next time I see them,” he claims.

“Before or after making out with Pyrope?” asks Kara playfully.

“NEITHER!”

Technically, this is correct, as when he, Red Robin, and Solstice find themselves accidentally embroiled in a conflict between the Scourge Sisters and a gang of petty thieves, it is Vriska who sidelines him.

“Really?!” Red Robin demands after finally locating the two.

Vriska grins back over her shoulder. “Is the fight over already?” she asks innocently, while John covers his blushing face with his arms and makes a loud, angry noise of distress.
“... Okay, run this past me again?” Batman says, rubbing his temple as he, Nightwing, Batgirl, and Robin stand in a meeting room of the Watchtower before Dirk, Dave, Rose, Roxy, and (for some reason) an intensely bored Damara. Because she’s never allowed unaccompanied, Rip is technically there, but he’s asleep in a chair, his jumpsuit dirty and bloody from whatever mission he’d just exhausted himself with before following Damara here. Hal is also probably still in the computers and may as well be counted as part of the meeting.

“Well, you asked us to figure out a way to lure Crocker out into an environment that we control so we won't be waiting for her to make the first move,” Dirk explains.

“Yes, Dirk,” says Batman with some exasperation. “I do seem to be able to recall yesterday.”

“What happened yesterday?” asks Rook ducking inside the door, and Dirk very nearly jumps out of his skin. “Shit, I shoulda had a camera. That was priceless.”

“Where’d you come from?” Dave asks, raising an eyebrow at his younger, copper-hued bird-clone.

“Literally next door,” says Rook, pointing to the adjacent wall. “Ya’ll suck at this ninja shit. What’s the Handmaid doing here?”

Rose cocks an eyebrow. “You know about the Handmaid?” she asks.

Rook points to his head and explains, “Game facts.”

“She wasn’t part of the game, though.”

“Doc had an influence on our game, and she was associated with him,” he says with a shrug.

“What the fuck, man?” Dave demands. “If you knew ’bout Scratch, why didn’t you warn us?”

“’Cuz y’ woulda died?” says Rook like it’s obvious. Because it is.

“... Right.”

Nightwing sighs heavily. “Okay, that’s enough,” he says. “Rook, this is Damara Megido of Beforus, not the Handmaid. She’s a time player, so she can interact with us desp - ”

“Yeah, dude, I know how the time aspect works,” says Rook, rolling his eyes.

“Point is get in here or leave; we actually have something to discuss.”

Rook considers and opts to stay, closing the door behind him. He decides this mostly on account of the way Dirk stiffens noticeably when Rook steps further into the room. Yeah, he’s gonna pick at that scab until it turns gangrenous. Serves the scab right.

“Okay, so tell me again about your plan?” says Batman. “In detail, this time, instead of jumping right to the completely insane conclusion.”

Dirk nods. “Okay, so Roxy and I came to the conclusion that we should probably just work with what’s worked with before: Rose and Dave. If we were to put them in the same roles as on my Earth, they would not only incense her but also serve the very clear message that we know she’s here.”
“The problem, as we pointed out to Dirk and Roxy, is that it takes a couple years to make a movie, and even longer to write an epic from scratch,” says Dave. “If we were already famous, then maybe we could use our resources to smash ’em out in less time, but even then it’d be, what? Most of a year? Fishy Crocker’s already startin’ to act. She’s got her tentacles wound all through Gotham an’ Metropolis with lotsa influence over the state of New York an’ mild influence over the nation an’ world at large.”

“Dirk and Roxy do have copies of the movies and books that we could use,” says Rose, “but we definitely can’t explain how the movies came into existence when none of the credits are legitimate in this universe. The book will have to be rewritten with more errors in order to look more like a writer’s first work, and then begins the arduous endeavor of finding a publisher. Not an impossible task, mind, but…”

“So I ask them, is there any kind of critical art that can be produced fast and cheap with a lot of attention?” says Roxy.

“Dirk and Dave both DJ,” Nightwing recalls. “You really think that’s gonna get the attention you want?”

“Right track, wrong train,” says Dave. “DJs never get the fast attention, no matter how good they are. For that, you need to either be a hot babe or have the voice of an angel, and, shockingly, we’ve found both in the form of someone the Condesce hates even more than Alpha Rose and Alpha Dave.”

“Her?” Rook asks, jabbing a finger toward Damara. “She looks like the jagged rocks at the bottom of a tall cliff.”

“Rook!” Nightwing chastises.

“He isn’t wrong,” Robin grumbles.

“We don’t judge women based on their appearances,” Bruce chides with a warning glance toward his youngest son.

“I’m not judging,” Robin argues. “I am observing that she has an appearance and that it is not unlike his description.”

“It’s cool; she knows,” says Dave, scrolling on his phone. “Thing is, she has been seen and apparently, there is a market for that. Hal’s already found like six fetish websites.” He starts to hold out his phone in demonstration, but Nightwing swats it away.

“Dave, there are children present!” he objects.

“It’s just stalker shots of her walking down the street,” he says, rolling his eyes.

At the same time, Batgirl says with a tone of confusion, “What do we not see? Robin and I both have many prostitutes? We be not shocked by sex.”

Dirk and Rose each raise an eyebrow, Dave and Rook press their lips into thin lines to keep from smirking, and Roxy breaks out into guffaws of laughter. Nightwing blushed brightly and quickly corrects, “Have helped many prostitutes. There are a lot of prostitutes in Gotham, and it’s not uncommon for them to need rescuing. Why do things always go this way with you lot?”

Rook lifts up his hands in mock innocence. “Don’t look at me. I just got here.”
“Dude, one of the first things you said to these guys was ‘Okay, but you’ll have to buy me dinner first,’” Dave reminds him.

Rook lowers his hands. “Okay, true. Nevermind.”

“Alright, ignoring for now how unbothered you are by what you yourself call ‘stalker shots’,” Batman starts.

“It be fine. I break them all,” Demara says, waving off the matter as she continues to meticulously file her claws to a razor point. “It make your world less boring slightly.”

“What are we talking about?” Rip asks groggily, apparently woken up by the argument.

“People have been taking ‘stalker shots’ of Megido,” Robin informs him.

“God,” Rip groans rolling his eyes to the ceiling. He brushes his dirty hair out of his eyes and groans, “If I have to bring one more pervert back from non-existence…”

“No one make you,” Damara clicks like she’s the one chastising him.

“Time makes me!” Rip argues.

“... And ignoring that for now,” Batman sighs, “what makes you think, besides these fringe websites, that she’s marketable?”

Dave fiddles with his phone again, decaptchalogue a bluetooth speaker, and then plays a file. It appears to be a remix of Atom Smash’s “Kill Me” with lyrics altered to add a lot of subtext. It’s dirty, visceral, dark, and haunting. Rip stares at the ceiling as he tries very hard not to blush.

Batman turns with surprise to Damara. “This is you?” he asks, pointing to the phone.

She nods.

He turns back to Dave. “I assume you approached us because you want me to fund a concert to get her publicity?”

“Unannounced free concert in Gotham Square for maximum exposure and after-the-fact publicity,” says Dave. “Hopefully also lowering the possibility that the Batterwitch will react with immediacy.”

“If it’s free and public, you need to tone down those lyrics. I’ve heard murderers with more subtlety,” says Batman. “Prove you’ve got an hour of content, and then come to me again at the manor.”

“Deal,” says Dave with a satisfied half-smirk. Rook rolls his eyes. Has he always looked like that much of a douchebag?

Batman nods. “With that out of the way, since you’ve asked to speak to me, let me now speak to you. As far as we are aware, the four who used the resurrection fraymotif together have all recovered by now. Have been for nearly a week, if not longer. We’ve been wondering why you haven’t shown interest in bringing out anyone else.”

The mood in the room immediately shifts. Rose sighs heavily. Roxy and Dave both shoot accusatory looks at Dirk. Dirk remains blank-faced and stiff but now as a means of blocking his friends instead of avoiding Rook. Rose admits, “The issue isn’t their recovery, but that we can’t agree on a next step. In the end, we simply agreed to delay the issue until Rook joined the conversation.”

Rook blinks in surprise. “Um, what?” he says. “This is the first I’ve heard of it.”
Rose shoots Dave a look, and he groans and rubs his eyes. “Ugh, I was supposed to invite you, but I kept forgetting,” he admits. “Look, the board is ‘Four-Way Happy Times Parlor’. We’re already on it. This would be easier if you’d get your own handle.”

Rook cocks his head slightly, looking at Dave sideways. After a second, he shrugs, says “Sure,” and whips out his phone.


“There wasn’t a point in the game,” says Rook as he continues tapping. “I didn’t need to chat much to people who weren’t you, and you usually needed to be able to see the chats that I did open, and it’s not like I expected to need an account after the game. You are literally the only players to ever try to take game elements with you.”

“Uh…”

“There done.” Rook tucks his phone away again in a blur of motion. Not as fast as he once was but getting better. Bodies are weird.

Rose looks at her phone and snickers. “turntechGodwing?” she says. Dave rolls his eyes to the ceiling and groans. When did he learn to emote so thoroughly? She waves off the matter and continues, “Alright with all that out of the way, the basics are this: We have generally agreed that the priority should be on those lives which are currently altering the memories of present survivors: Kankri, Sufferer, Alpha Rose, Alpha Dave, and Bro. Roxy, Jane, Jake, and Jade want to bring Bro out because they think he’s negatively affecting Dirk. Dirk, however, doesn’t think it’s an issue, and thinks Bro should be at the bottom of the list. Dave, Sollux, Karkat, and I think we should prioritize Alpha Rose and Alpha Dave to get their help on the Condesce problem with as much immediacy as possible. Everyone else is either conflicted, indifferent, or currently inside a cocoon.”

“I vote Bro,” Rook says immediately.

“What?” Dave and Dirk demand, as Roxy delightedly high-fives Rook.

“C-C-C-C-Combo Breaker!” Rook teases, ironically deadpan.

“You did not cast that vote just for a shitty meme,” Dave demands, rolling his eyes.

Rook huffs. “No, obviously, it’s just the cherry on top,” he says. He raises up his hand to count off his reasons on his fingers. Claws. Whatever. “Point One: I want Bro. Point Two: Apparently, he’s fucking up Dirk somehow, who we need in condition to continue this soul-grabbing thing? Point Three: It annoys Dirk, which is awesome. Point Four: I want Bro. Point Five: I want Bro.”

“What the fuck?!” Dave screeches.

“What did I do?” Dirk demands, in a quiet deadpan that probably can’t actually be called demanding.

“You didn’t visit me,” says Rook with a shrug. Also it bothers me that you’re bothered by me, he doesn’t say.

“Why the fuck would you be so desperate t’ have Bro around?” Dave demands.

“Um, because he’s our bro?” Rook says, cocking his head again in the other direction like he honestly does not understand the question.

“He was an abusive shit who fuckin’ hated us,” Dave snarls.

“Three fuckin' years 'f growing the hell up an' learning to see things f'r what they fuckin' are,” Dave says. “I'd assumed that you'd experienced the same on your magical space cruise, but apparen'ly not. Guess you're ain't jus' physically stunted, huh? Now, I fin'ly get why Karkat pisses himself off so much.”

“Say that again!” Rook snarls, dropping into a stance, but Dave just pushes him aside and heads for the door.

“You want Bro? You can have 'im,” he says. “Roxy, tell Jane and Jake that it’s been decided.” If he could slam these stupid space doors, he would. Instead, he flashsteps as soon as he's around the corner.

However, because the Watchtower is a fucking maze and Dave has shitty memory for identical hallways, Nightwing still manages to catch him at the transport bay. “Hey, can I talk to you a sec?” Nightwing asks, reaching out to stop Dave.

Dave slaps his hand out of the way and snaps, “Wrong Strider. You get the muscley douche with the anime shades.” He steps into the transport tube.

“Look, I didn't come down here to fight,” Nightwing says. “I just… what you said about your brother…”

Dave pauses. “Well…” he says in a thoughtful tone. “I guess I-” And then he hits the button that disassembles his atoms and projects them down to the Kansas hub.

Nightwing sighs. “That went well.”
Raven stands in the Gotham apartment currently occupied by a pair of models and a seer. It is the seer that she is here to… see. Rose Lalonde closes the door after her, locks it, and returns her attention to their visitor. Like the other residents, Rose is impeccably dressed, but she and her girlfriend are also much more well-mannered than Starfire’s protege, which is a relief. Raven does like Jade, but if she’s going to be having more interactions with these new gods than previously expected, she is glad to see that it will be a calm experience.

“Would you like something to drink?” Rose asks politely, hands clasped loosely and patiently in front of her.

“I don’t require anything at the moment,” says Raven. “How about a tour?”

In response to this suggestion, the until-that-moment well-mannered Kanaya Maryam starts hissing and, somehow, rattling. The yellows of her eyes threaten a darker color.

“Without actually encroaching on the rooms,” Raven adds to make it clear that she has no intention of trying to figure out where Kanaya has hidden away the infant mothergrub. “It may help us organize our arrangements.”

Rose looks to Kanaya to see if this is going to be an issue. They’d talked about it before, but it has become obvious that trolls can be subject to volatile emotional states. Kanaya closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and stops hissing. She presses her hand to her chest and the rattling quiets as well.

Raven does not want to have to tell Jason Todd that his theory on “why the fuck insect chicks would have tits” is correct, so she pretends not to notice.

“That would be fine,” Kanaya says finally, smiling pleasantly once more. Interesting.

Rose nods with just a hint of wariness and leads Raven to just the beginning of the hall. “The larger room is resided in by Kanaya and myself. Those doors are the hall closet and wash room,” she explains to Raven. “On the other side, at the far end, is the room Jade now resides in, which used to belong to Roxy and Calliope. The closer door is Dirk’s room. And I think you can tell where the kitchenette, dining area, and sitting room are, considering that we are currently standing in them.”

Raven considers this information and asks, “Is Dirk Strider not residing at Wayne Mansion?”

“He is,” Rose admits. “But no one else has needed the space, and Dirk’s anxiety is lessened when he knows he has multiple exit strategies.” She sees Raven’s thoughtful expression, and adds, “But if you would like to discuss –”
“I do not require board here as I do not intend to have a roommate relationship with you,” Raven cuts her off. She glances toward Kanaya to make sure the troll isn’t currently reading her as a threat - Kanaya currently appears curious instead. - and then she steps up to Dirk’s door and places a hand against the wood. “The doorway is all I need.”

“All you need for - ?” Rose starts but cuts herself off when Raven opens the (formerly locked) door to reveal a swirling wall of purple-black energy.

Kanaya is immediately at her side. “How did - It’s a pocket dimension, isn’t it?” she asks, eagerness in her voice. It appears that Raven has inadvertently won over the sylph of space in a most unexpected fashion.

Raven nods. “It is not my residence, but a dimension in which I keep my rarer artifacts. A manifestation of both my mind and the energies of the dimensional walls of which my… progenitor had dominion,” she explains. “If either of you open this door, you will be able to access the portal. To anyone else, the portal will not appear, even if you are in their company. Should either of you, for some reason, enter Dirk’s room through the window, you’d find it exactly as you recall it and, upon opening the door from that side, find yourself able to easily enter the rest of the apartment.”

“This is a room in your mind?” Rose asks. “That seems… intimate. You’re sure that you wish to allow me access so quickly? You said you had an issue with gods.”

Raven shrugs off her concern. “If you were a threat, I would know,” she says. “The deity issue… I am getting used to it. Besides, this is where I keep the resources that we will need for any mentor relationship.”

“You… you said either of us,” Kanaya says. “I’m not sure…”

“As you can see, Sylph, I suspect I may have something to offer you as well,” Raven says. She steps part way into the swirling energy wall and beckons the girls with one hand. “Come. Let me show you.” And then she disappears into the swirl.

Rose and Kanaya exchange uncertain glances. Rose shrugs and follows after Raven, and Kanaya follows after her.

The pocket dimension is a very large, elaborate, and suitably musty library with odd artifacts in glass cases tucked among the books on various shelves. It reminds Rose of the castle libraries and the libraries on the meteor, even though the design replicates neither. It has the same feel. It feels… like home. It makes her chest ache.

“I rarely engage with heroism these days,” Raven explains, “so mentoring you as a sidekick simply will not work, and I don’t think it’s what you need, Rose. You are an avid learner of archaic skills and vast histories.” She spreads her hands to indicate the library around her. “Here, I have both. Explore as you wish, and if you have trouble with anything, I will help you… Yes?” she asks, stopping as she notes that Rose is already distracted, a finger tracing over a large leather volume that had been set out on the first desk, right next to where they entered.

“Hm?” says Rose, looking up. “Oh, um, sorry, I… used to have a volume of this. In modern hardback. You must have been reading it recently.”

Raven steps closer to read the cover. Grimoire of the Zoologically Dubious. She had not read it recently, and even if she had, she would have put it back on the shelf when she was done. She decides to not yet vocalize these troubling thoughts and instead says, “Yes, this was why I now decided to mentor you. After reading through that very thorough debriefing you and your friends
gave, I think I can offer some guidance in your manipulation of forces and your collection of arcane knowledge. However, *if* you are interested, and I understand if you are not, I think my experience and skills will be much more helpful in guiding you toward a more balanced approach to summoning.”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!” Kanaya snarls, tearing the book out of Rose's hands and throwing it far down the aisle. Raven subtly catches it with her telekinesis and drops it more gently to the ground. Retrieving it at the moment might further incite Kanaya.

“Kanaya…” Rose says with tones of doubt and patience and love.

“NO!” Kanaya insists. “Last time I begged you, pleaded with you not to do it. I was so certain you would die. And you did! You are lucky to have been resurrected, and that trick can only be performed once!”

“Kanaya…”

“I begged and pleaded because I was too far away,” Kanaya continues tearfully. “But this time, I am here and I… I refuse to watch you engage in another display of this genetic predisposition toward self-destruction!”

With a pitying sigh, Rose reaches up and strokes away the jade-tinted tear stains on what may or may not be her matesprit’s cheekbones, and she tells her, “Kanaya, my love, you know they've never left me.”

Kanaya’s mask of bitter anger cracks and falls away, showing the fragile, worried girl underneath. She turns her face into the cup of her matesprit’s hand and a sob escapes her unbidden. “I know,” she admits in a whisper. “But I don't want you to - I can't just let them take you, after all of this.”

“I apologize,” says Raven, causing the distraught young women to return their attentions to her once more. “There’s been a misunderstanding, and that is my fault. I have organized this with the intention to make use of my experiences for your benefit and yet have been elusive about those experiences out of a sense of shame. Would you allow me to inform you now?”

Kanaya and Rose exchanged perplexed glances, and then nod to Raven in bemused agreement.

“My mother, in her rebellious youth, joined the Cult of Trigon, a group devoted to the destruction of the earth, which they saw as unworthy of continuance,” Raven explains. “It was in a ritual there that the beast was temporarily and partially manifested to rape and impregnate my mother, bringing into creation my own self.

“My mother fled to the inter-dimensional temple of Azarath. There the monks taught peace and passivity. But as I began to come of age, my powers beginning to manifest, I began to understand my true nature, and I knew that passivity would not be enough.

“Trigon is an invader and destroyer of worlds, gaining power, sustenance, and *entertainment* by destroying world after world after world, and when that entire dimension is finally thoroughly wrecked, he finds a way to move on to another. He appears in dreams. He whispers false promises to the weak-minded. He begins his cults, and he seeds his children. When those children come of age, they become his tool, his key to the new dimension.

“Earth did not have long. So, against the wishes of the Monks of Azarath, I went to earth and sought out heroes who I could make believe and trust me. It was I who first formed the Teen Titans, and who set them against my father in his partial manifestation in the inter-dimensional realm between
worlds, preventing him from using me to break through.

“But in my hastiness, my single-mindedness, I neglected the humanity begat me by my mother. I manipulated and lied to the heroes who would have been my friends and very nearly lost their love, the only that I have felt outside my mother. In my growth since then, I have made many mistakes, some small and some quite drastic,” says Raven. “It is my intent to guide you as any mentor should: to offer you the chance to learn from my mistakes before you repeat them and to assist you through the inevitable experience of making your own. Just as I cannot change being Trigon’s daughter, you cannot change your spiritual connection to the ‘horrorterror’ of the Epsilon Session. But you can, like I, choose what it is you do with that, about that. You alone, Rose, choose your destiny.”

Raven allows several moments of silence to pass in order to grant Rose the opportunity to process all that has been said. Several times, Rose attempts to speak, but finds herself without words. Finally, Raven smiles kindly and says, “I don’t expect you to make a decision soon. Take time to think on it and to discuss it with your matesprit. I will allow you to keep access to this library as long as you wish, no matter what our relationship to each other.”

She then turns her attention to Kanaya. “And Ms. Maryam, my offer to you is less dramatic,” she explains. “As you can see, I have accumulated quite a variety and quantity of resources and have some knowledge of the nature of space as well as insight and intuition regarding the self of people. If you like, I would like to try exploring with you just what it may mean to be a sylph of space and thus help you discover your power.”

“I… May I also have time to consider?” Kanaya said awkwardly unsure of what to think of this sudden development from a virtual stranger.

Raven nods. “Of course,” she says. “I do not wish for you to think that I’m pressuring you by already adding the portal here, but - ”

“No, no, the library part is fine,” Rose says quickly. She hasn't moved away from Kanaya's side yet, but her eyes hungrily comb the shelves.

Kanaya looks down at her over-eager matesprit fondly and explains, “I often suspect Rose’s diamond quadrant to be filled not by her brother or any other friends but by all libraries ever.” The dirty look Rose shoots her only broadens her smile, and she adds, “It's quite pitiful, really.” She returns her attention to Raven, who has gone to pick up the thrown grimoire from the floor. “Would you like to stay for… tea? Or something?”

Raven picks up the book, frowning, still disconcerted by its misplaced nature. She makes up her mind. “Actually, I had rather been looking forward to spending time getting to know you girls better,” she answered honestly, tucking the massive tome into her ethereal cloak. “Unfortunately, it seems I am needed elsewhere. Please do let me know when would be a good time to meet again.”

Raven disappears from the library without waiting for further response, appearing in a bunker-like room with a chalkboard, mechanical equipment, and a table at which a little girl is drawing something that might be engine schematics and might be a fanciful creature. The girl looks up at her skeptically. “Who are you?” she asks Raven.

“Raven of Azarath,” says Raven. “May I ask who you are?”

“Rani of the 30th century,” says Rani of the 30th century.

“Ah,” says Raven, finding no reason not to immediately accept this answer. “Do you know where Mr. Hunter is?”
“764 Common Era,” says Rani.

“I see. Do you know when he might be back?”

“No.”

“Are there any other adults here right now?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think you might summon one of them to meet me?”

Rani nods dutifully and puts her crayon down. “Yeah, okay,” she says. Then, “MIIIIIIIIIIIIICHEEEEEEEEELLE!”

Raven winces briefly at the siren-like screeching. “Yes, thank you, that is definitely something I could not do for myself.”

“You're welcome,” says Rani, who is already coloring again.

A blond woman, whom Raven presumes to be "Michelle," runs into the room to see what's the matter, then stops in terror at the sight of Raven, eyes quickly darting back and forth between Raven and Rani, trying to gage the threat level. Raven briefly considers quelling her panic, but the unfamiliar and unbidden mental manipulation would risk causing more panic. “Who the hell are you?” Michelle demands. “No one's supposed to be able to get in here!”

That surprises Raven, and she makes sure to show that on her face as well as her shame. “Oh! Is that so? I sincerely apologize for causing alarm by teleporting to what is intended as a secure location,” she says.

“She's Raven of Azarath,” Rani informs Michelle.

“Ra - Raven?” asks Michelle, finally relaxing a bit and risking a few steps forward. “From the Teen Titans?”

“Once upon a time, yes,” Raven says with a nod.

Michelle frowns skeptically, closing the distance between them to step between Raven and Rani. Obligingly, Raven backs away about two feet just to show her lack of intended threat. “Why are you here?” Michelle asks.

“I came to ask a favor of Rip Hunter,” Raven says. She produces the grimoire from her cloak and holds it out to Michelle. “I need to know if there are any traceable chronal signatures on that book.”

Michelle blinks down at the book. “Um, okay? Can I ask why?”

“Someone entered my private library and moved it to where Rose Lalonde would immediately see it upon her first entry.”

“Okay, that's weird but - ”

“A significant percentage of this library is a manifestation of my own mind,” Raven adds.

Michelle shakes her head, confused. “I see why that would creep you out, but what makes you think it involves time travel?”
“Because the only people who can enter are those I give permission. It has no actual physical location.”

Michelle just looks confused, but Rani catches on immediately. “So the only person who could have been there without you knowing is someone who gets you to give them permission in the future, then enters, time travels back to when they didn't have permission, moves your things around, then travels back and leaves before you ever notice them!” the little girl says happily.

Raven nods. “Yes, exactly.”

Michelle scowls down at the book. “I'll see what we can do.”

Chapter End Notes

Already getting some awesome prompts, guys! I'll probably work on them during the upcoming hiatus. (The wife and I are still having immigration issues, so I have to see her via lots of vacations, hence taking lots of time off.) Keep ‘em coming! Details about prompts are on Ch. 28 if you missed it.
Daddy Issues

Chapter Notes

So the wife (mademoisellePlume) and I are entering month two of "actually being in the same country" vacation time, which means less trips to random Tennessee cities and more immigration paperwork, business chores, and apparently fic. (Look, we never pretended not to be giant nerds.) I'm getting this one in order and sketching out the final stages for ending it. (Another reason why updates are slow: I don't want to put up chapters I might end up editing.) She and Demenior have been working on ruining lives via sad Voltron fic. Oh, and we've also started working on the fics I'll be putting up after DCstuck ends: Junior League. Look for an excerpt at the end of this fic.

So, this time, when it’s decided the alpha players will try to bring someone into existence, the Justice League involves itself with a lot more supervision and planning. Instead of being done at the Watchtower, it’s done at S.T.A.R. Labs in a room meant for students observing surgeries, round with a balcony above to allow students to see well without actually risking interference. All the equipment, however, has been cleared out of the room so that Dirk, Jake, Jane, and Roxy will simply be sitting in the middle of a big white room. There are, however, several sensors scattered across the edge of the room, to see what kind of readings S.T.A.R. can get on the event.

On the balcony above is Batman, Green Arrow, Martian Manhunter, Question, John Stewart, Kyle Rayner, Dave Strider, John Egbert, Oracle, Rose Lalonde, Jade Harley, Terezi Pyrope, Karkat Vantas, Kanaya Maryam, Vriska Serket, Calliope, and Rook Sprite. Aradia’s cocoon had begun to crack, so Sollux Captor, Booster Gold, and Dr. Mid-Nite had stayed aboard the Watchtower to keep an eye on her. In the surgery room below, Dirk Strider, Roxy Lalonde, and Jake English are getting last minute pep talks from their mentors (Nightwing, Black Canary, and Superman respectively) while Jane Crocker gets her own pep talk from her father, who, if everything went right, would soon no longer be the only guardian to have made it out of the former universe alive. It’s a prospect that has Dave openly pacing (and Karkat bitching about it), Rook practically vibrating with suppressed eagerness, and Green Arrow grinding his teeth.

“You’re sure you can do this?” says Black Canary for what may or may not be the thousandth time.

Roxy rolls her eyes but smiles, never once begrudging of the feeling of having someone worry over her. “It’s fine!” she says yet again. She points above her to where Rook has leaned so far over the railing that Green Arrow has grabbed him by the shirt collar. “We’ve already done this once.”

“Yes, and then once we were able to wake you again, you wouldn’t stop giggling for over an hour,” Black Canary reminds her. “We were starting to wonder how you’d managed to get Joker-gassed in the process.”

Roxy snickers in disbelief. “Really?” she says, starting to giggle.

“This does not instill confidence, Roxy.”

“Are you sure he should be the next person you bring out?” Mr. Crocker asks his daughter. “Your friend Dave seems… upset?”
Jane sighs and crosses her arms, glancing aside uneasily. “We’re… We’re not sure what happened between Dave and his brother,” she admits. “He varies between refusing to say and exploding with undetailed accusations that Rook, who supposedly shares the very same childhood memories, refutes. The only people who know about it are Rose, Karkat, and Dirk, and they won’t talk for him. I’m not sure how much Dirk actually knows, anyway.”

“What they’ve hinted at isn’t good, though,” says Mr. Crocker. “And we do know for a fact that the version of Mr. Strider which you are attempting to extract was influenced by a malicious entity created in the ‘retconned’ timeline, and it seems very possible that resurrecting him could, in fact, pull that entity, if not English himself, right along with.”

“I know,” Jane says, frowning down at the floor. “But we can’t sacrifice Dirk’s mind just because we’re afraid of what might happen. Dirk deserves better than that, no matter what he says about it. He remembers being this man, more and more. Nightwing reports that Dirk has been confused about his own age and background, and his depression and anxiety are worsening. We need to get Bro out.” She sets her jaw with determination and looks back up at her dad. “Worse comes to worse… We’ve English’s ass once, we can do it again. We will always find a way.”

Mr. Crocker surprises her (and really, it shouldn’t by now) by pulling her into a tight hug. “You’re such a smart, strong young woman, and so brave and loyal for your friends, and I do hope you know how very proud I am of you,” he whispers into her hair.

She buries her face in his warm and solid chest and says, “Of course, I do, Daddy.”

“No pep talk for me?” Dirk teases, watching Nightwing from the corner of his shades as he stretches out his shoulders in a useless attempt to ease his own nerves.

“Just thinking,” Nightwing says. He’s leaning against a wall, watching the others. “You’ve been prepping for six days. I doubt you need my words to assure you of your abilities.”

Dirk frowns and watches Jane hug her dad across the room. “It unnerves me when you get my number like that,” he mutters.

Nightwing snickers. “Now you know how literally everyone else feels around you.”

“I already know that,” Dirk says, curving his neck and arms back in an attempt to crack his own spine. “You forget I’ve got a literal copy of myself hanging about.”

Nightwing frowns, starts to say something, then reconsiders. Finally, he says what’s actually been on his mind for weeks. “You’re not my first mentee,” he admits quietly.

“Well, I figured I could take that for given,” says Dirk. He stops stretching to look at Nightwing curiously. “You’ve been doing the hero thing since… what? The forties?”

“What?” Nightwing demands. “I’m not even thirty!”

“… Right,” says Dirk, already bringing up files into his shades to cross-check the info Jade and Jake gave him. “Comic book logic applied to soap opera time.”

Nightwing makes a pained groan. “Ugh, don’t talk to me about Jade’s mind-bending universe, okay?” he says. “I was trying to say something important.”

Dirk shrugs it off and closes the files again. Though he can hear the microprocessors buzzing, so AR was still working on something. “Which is?” he asks.

Dirk is surprised. “Really?” he says.

“It wasn’t exactly sunshine and rainbows being Batman’s sidekick,” Nightwing tells him. “I wasn’t really looking to bring someone else into that. I preferred a team I could count on. But I found myself without one, and I… Tarantula…”

“Tarantula, leader of Las Arañas?” Dirk interrupts.

Nightwing looks… embarrassed? Dirk is quickly losing track of this conversation, if he ever had it in the first place. “Yeah, look, she…” Nightwing sighs heavily. “She was neutral at the time, but she claimed that if I didn’t train her to fight for good she would willingly go evil. The second she got the opportunity, though, she…”

TT: Dude, I’ve been cross-referencing since he started this conversation, and I think I might have an idea of what he’s talking about.
TT: Trust me when I say that for once in our life, let’s try our best not to be a complete asshat about this.
TT: Let him say whatever he wants to and drop it.

Nightwing shakes his head. “Look, my point is that I know from bad guys, from manipulators and con artists and people who dig their way into your life just to tear you apart. You’ve made your mistakes, but, Dirk, you are not them. And I… Whatever you think of yourself, I’m really glad Batman convinced me to try again. I’m glad I’m mentoring you.”

It takes Dirk a moment to realize he’s expected to say something back, and he barely stops himself from saying *So that I won’t become a villain?* Instead, like the unsocialized idiot that he is, he says, “Cool.”

“Right,” Nightwing says, looking embarrassed again. “Anyway, um, good luck.” He pats Dirk awkwardly on the shoulder and then heads toward the stairs up to the balcony.

TT: The fuck was that about?
TT: I’ll tell you when you’re older.

“Jake, look at me,” Superman says sternly, and Jake forces himself to obey. Superman points to the crest on his chest. “I’ve talked to you about this already, remember?”

Jake nods and can’t help but smile a little. “It means hope,” he says, one hand lifting to touch the symbol on his own chest. The media had taken to calling him Golden Boy, having no idea what his costume meant, similarly to how Clark had been called Superman without any idea that the crest wasn’t actually an S. But Jake appreciated the common ground.

“Hope isn’t just about what we want for the world,” Superman tells him. “It’s also about what the
world wants from us. We don’t wear these symbols just to inspire people to act, we wear them to ensure that we will act on their behalf when needed.” He pats Jake on the shoulder without any awkwardness and tells him, “You don’t have to hope this will work, Jake. You just need to hope you can help, that everything will turn out right.”

Jake smiles up at his mentor and nods decisively. “Alright!” he agrees. “I think I can do that.”

Superman gives him a confident grin, ruffles his hair, and floats up to the balcony to join the others. Batman accuses him of being a show-off. “Would you take the stairs if you could fly?” Superman counters, to which Batman argues that this does not detract from his point.

In the surgery room below, Dirk takes a seat cross-legged on the floor, captchaalogues his shades to prevent AR from distracting him, and concentrates on his breathing and sensing the flow of his power. Jake takes a seat across from him and fidgets a bit, ready to get started. Jane sits on Dirk’s left, and Roxy sits on Dirk’s right.

Once the room has gone entirely quiet, Dirk opens his eyes, and the brilliant amber still surprises Jake after all this time. He tries not to get distracted by thoughts of the previous contexts in which he had seen Dirk’s eyes unguarded. Dirk reaches his right hand into the center of the four of them, and Jake takes it.

“Right hand,” Dirk reminds him patiently.

“R-Right!” Jake snatches his left hand back into his lap and clasps Dirk’s right hand again with his. Roxy giggles and does the same with Jane.

Dirk closes his eyes again to concentrate, and Jake follows his lead. Slowly, violet-red energy begins to build in Dirk, snaking out from his chest to his extended arm and twisting toward Jake. Jake, in contrast, begins to radiate a golden glow all over. But it’s not until Dirk’s Heart reaches his own Hope that the connection snaps into place and begins to thrum with energy.

Roxy and Jane close their eyes and concentrate. There is no color visible from Roxy, and yet the effect of it can still be felt by its absence, like observing a black hole from the lack of light. Jane radiates an off-white color that cascades across her skin until it reaches Roxy, again snapping into place and beginning to thrum.

Along both pairs of joined hands, the colors (and non-color) begin to pulse slowly back and forth along the connection, slowly gaining speed. Faster and faster. Hope and Heart into Dirk, then into Jake, then back again. Life and Void into Roxy, then into Jane, then back again. The pulse quickens until it's vibrating, and then, when it's an indistinguishable blur, Dirk suddenly grabs Jane’s right shoulder with his left hand, slamming his Hope-Heart into her Life-Void, and she immediately grabs Jake’s right shoulder with her left hand, thrusting the four-way fraymotif into him, and he grabs Roxy, and Roxy grabs Dirk.

And only then, suddenly and unexpectedly, Roxy’s non-color absence energy flips to a deep blue creation energy and the fraymotif begins whirling between the four of them, in both directions and occasionally sparking across the middle.

And then that's when the form appears above them. At first, it's only vaguely humanoid and flickering in and out of existence, but Dirk scowls, eyes still closed and concentrates harder. A whip of violet-red energy entwined with gold lashes out from Dirk’s chest to the figure’s and stabilizes it. Roxy's gold-entwined navy energy begins to drain into the figure, filling him with existence. Bones shape. Muscles. Blood and mucus. Skin cells. Hair and clothing.
“You could have warned me,” Rook hisses quietly to Dave, who had already rolled his eyes to the ceiling to avoid the disgusting sight. Dave counters that if he had to suffer Rook’s grotesque creation, then Rook has to pay the same due.

Just as the fraymotif is very obviously beginning to strain, a shaking and sweating Jane reaches out with her own beige and gold energy and zaps Bro to life. Bro drops to the ground between them as they fall backward in exhaustion. Improperly grounded, the fraymotif snaps like four overstretched rubber bands back to its original deities.

Black Canary, Batman, Nightwing, Superman, Martian Manhunter, and Mr. Crocker hurry down along side into the surgery room while S.T.A.R. medical staff that had been waiting just outside the doors quickly flood in. The staff quickly checks the kids’ vitals, then carries them out to Recovery, which had already been prepped for exhausted teen gods as part of the plan for this. Nightwing, Black Canary, Superman, and Mr. Crocker follow the doctors out while Batman and the Green Lanterns secure the room.

Batman turns to nod to Martian Manhunter, who is standing by Bro, who still hadn't moved from where he fell to the floor. J’onn reaches down to check Bro’s vitals, and only when he touches him does Bro finally react. Bro leaps backward in a flash of speed toward one of the doors despite the fact that it is being blocked by a green wall. It doesn't matter anyway because Bro trips over his own feet, falls on his ass, and only a moment later turns to the side to throw up.

Hissed arguments draw Batman's attention briefly to the balcony where Green Arrow has his arms hooked under Rook’s armpits to keep him from interfering while Rook, Dave, and Rose argue. Jade has an arm hooked around Dave's in warning, and John stands scowling between the two versions of the same Strider. It might have been less distracting to have had the witnesses leave with the medical team, but they couldn't be sure what kind of powers they'd need available if everything went to crap.

J'onn tries again, spreading his hands in a pacifying gesture. “Please be calm,” he tells Bro. “This must be shocking and disorienting, but we mean you no harm.”

Bro appears to be ignoring J'onn, but Batman can see his right hand repeatedly making the sliding gesture that's supposed to draw a weapon from a strife deck. From the sliver of expression he can see on Bro’s ducked head, Bro is frustrated and confused. Batman's own hand flicks to his batarangs on his belt, just in case Bro figures out some other method of attack despite the apparently empty strife deck.

J'onn risks another step closer to where Bro crouches. “If you would allow me to examine your well-being, we'll soon be able to unite you with -”

Right on cue, Bro registers the muffled voices and turns to squint up at the balcony. Everyone shuts up immediately as Rook and Dave stare right back. Bro seems about to say something when J'onn reaches for him again. In a flash, Bro grabs J'onn’s hand in a pinch-grip, stands, and slams J'onn back into the nearest wall, his free hand still making a futile attempt to grab a weapon. Still failing to find anything in his strife deck, Bro raises his hand to punch J'onn instead, but J'onn phases through the wall.

Before Bro can react or the other heroes can continue the fight, Dave steps up against the railing and shouts down, “Hey, douchebag!”

Bro turns his attention back up to the balcony. Everyone tenses, unsure what will happen next.

“Cal’s fucking dead forever. We won. It's over,” Dave snarls viciously. “So maybe consider not hitting people for once in your sad life.”
Bro raises an eyebrow, but his shoulders go lax, finally believing that he isn't under threat. He starts to look around, getting his bearings, only to have his attention drawn back to the balcony by the sound of a slamming door. Dave has stormed out, Karkat hurrying after him. Rook takes advantage of the distraction to drop out of Green Arrow’s grip, hop the railing, and jump down to the surgery floor. He barely keeps himself from grinning. Barely stops himself from running up to hug his brother. Instead, he says, “Hey.”

Bro looks him over once, nods, and says, “Sup.”

Chapter End Notes

Excerpt from Junior League vol. 1 iss. 1: Cat's Cradle --

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Clark tells his daughter as they jet at a much slower speed than he's used to clear across the country to Titans’ Edge, the San Francisco headquarters of Titans West, built into the side of a cliff. There have been a lot of headquarters over the years and, surprisingly, the one hanging precariously over certain doom is the one to have lasted the longest. “Both Kon and Kara have spent significant time with various iterations of the Titans.”

“Yeah, but they knew people there,” Joa-El sulks. “They weren't dispatched via Justice League to fill in a gap.”

They land on the helicopter pad, and Clark turns to her with all seriousness. “Joa, if you don't want to do this, you don't have to.”

“No,” she says quietly. “I never get to actually participate when I team up with family. Anything I can handle, you're fully capable of handling for yourself.”

“You could always just... not do the sup- Okay, stop glaring at me. I was just voicing the options.”

“It's fine,” says Joa, crossing her arms over her chest. “I'm just nervous.”

Clark smiles gently and assures her, “I promise there's no reason to be nervous. They'll love you. How could they not?”

“Are you going to stand up here all day or what?” Robin demands as he appears in the doorway of the roof stairs.

Clark sighs heavily. “To be fair, he's always like that,” he says.
“Please don’t make my moirail murder you the second she hatches,” Sollux chides Booster for the umpteenth time as they sit and wait in the Watchtower’s medical bay for Aradia to hatch.

If Booster wasn’t a mostly defenseless mammalian alien, he probably would be growling when he says, “You’re sitting closer than I am.”

“Yes, because I’m not a mostly defenseless mammalian alien,” says Sollux.

“Defenseless?!” Booster repeats, incensed.

“Language,” Dr. Mid-Nite chides in a bored, absent tone.

“What? I said- You have headphones in!”

Sollux turns to see Dr. Mid-Nite looking up from the stack of paperwork precariously balanced in his lap. He does, in fact, remove a headphone from one ear. “Sorry, what?”

“I wasn’t swearing,” Booster informs him.

“Ah, I apologize. I had assumed by the tone I overheard.”

“Why are you wearing headphones?”

“You don’t think I want to listen to you two bicker all day?” Mid-Nite’s eyes slide past Booster. “Captor…”

Sollux sighs heavily, embarrassed by his own behavior, and lowers his eyes to the floor. “Look, it passes the time. I didn't mean to-”

“No, Captor, look!”

Sollux turns back to Aradia’s cocoon to see that among the many cracks, one small slit has formed in the leathery surface. One dark finger peaks out from the damage it has wrought. Booster is immediately on his feet, but Sollux throws up a barrier to prevent him from getting closer. Aradia will never forgive him if he lets her kill her new lusus. He's not even sure she'll still want an adolescent troll in any quadrant, but at the very least-

The finger disappears back into the cocoon. There's a sloshing sound of Aradia moving about, and some biomaterial leaks out of the slit she'd cut. Huh, is it like a recuperacoon in there? He's kind of jealous.

Another slosh and he can hear the scraping sound of her clawing at several other areas. Eventually she returns to the weak point she'd already cut into, and more gashes appear. Four fingers this time.
There's a low hum, the sound of vibration under goo, so he can't tell what kind of call it is. Distress? Warning?

But he loves her, so he takes the risk. He steps closer and touches the emerged fingers lightly. They immediately flinch back into the cocoon, and he immediately regrets every bad decision that he has ever made.

And then there's another angry slash, tearing a hole in the cocoon that fluid gushes out of that she shoves her arm through, desperately searching, and he's immediately there, holding her hand, reassuring her. He hasn't got the rumblespheres to communicate with, but he uses his telekinesis to make the air vibrate as soothingly as he can. He ignores the sounds of Booster's loud objections behind him.

Her fingers are much longer than they used to be and now plated with black chitin, still a bit rust-tinted in its newness. Her claws are long and bright, bright warning yellow, and it makes him miss his bees.

The hand slowly pulls away again, and Sollux can't help the pained whine that escapes him. The hand does not disappear but instead pulls and tears at the hole in the cocoon. Her other hand soon joins it, more fluid sloshing out. The less fluid surrounding her, the better he can hear the vibration of her rumblespheres.

She is growing increasingly agitated. Exponentially so. Soon this will not be a moirail level problem, and Sollux forces himself to retreat back to Booster’s side and strengthen the psionic barrier he has erected.

The two human men look down at him questioningly. “What just happened?” Booster demands as Mid-Nite asks, “Why did you retreat?”

There are some things that Karkat could have explained more thoroughly, but as long as he's stuck here with them, Sollux might as well explain. “No troll enjoys dormancy periods, but females take especially poorly to confusion and disorientation,” he tells them.

“Because they evolved as guards and warriors?” asks Mid-Nite.

Sollux doesn't answer, cut off by the sound of Aradia SCREECHING. He concentrates and tries to vibrate the air again, that reassuring tone of “everything is safe here.” Aradia, thankfully, shuts the fuck up before they all lose auricular function. Instead, she makes a moaning-wailing sound for him - for him - that makes his heart break. Where are you? Where are you, I'm alone? that painful wail pleads.

“It's fine,” he tries to tell her, not sure if she can understand yet. “It's fine, it's fine, it's fine…”

Two more sets of vicious claws - Aradia’s feet - grip the edge of the hole, and all four sets tear in separate directions. Rusty-gray fluid gushes out like a squashed grub, and Aradia comes tumbling out, and…

And Booster is immediately doubled over laughing. Sollux isn't much better, having to hold the wall for support. He can't see Mid-Nite behind him, but it seems unlikely that the man is entirely humorless. Aradia is now tall and long-limbed, her round body now armored in dark chitin, her rack impressively massive. She is also completely entangled in her own goop-heavy hair and buzzing out confused distress signals.

“We really should have cut that before she cocooned,” Sollux giggles, wiping tears from his eyes. He
releases the psionic wall, figuring she probably can't do too much damage in this state, and Booster is immediately at her side despite the fact that he's still laughing so hard he can barely breathe.

This is going to take days to wash out and, to be honest, Sollux looks forward to it whole-heartedly. He missed her.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck: Jason, Raven, and Jade have adventures involving dogs and Gotham villains.
A Man Wonder's Best Friend

Chapter Summary

Warning: Contains animal abuse and death related to dog fighting and related blood and gore as well as human murder. It's Gotham, folks.

Chapter Notes

The last chapter was so short, I'm adding this one immediately after.

This chapter was entirely inspired by this adorable post by InkyDandy on Tumblr, right down to the dog's name. Slightly spoilery, though, jsyk.

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Speaking of art, I've totally forgotten to mention THIS WONDERFUL FANART OF ROOK LEFT FOR ME IN THE COMMENTS BY MYNAMEISYARRA!!! You're awesome, mynameisyarra!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason Todd lies flat on his belly on the roof of a Cleveland apartment complex abandoned and slated for demolition. He watches a window through the scope of his sniper rifle. The window is closed, so unless the guy stands right by it, it may take Jason multiple shots which is never great as far as escaping the scene goes, but so long as he gets this guy, it'll be worth it.

“Come on, come on,” Jason hisses under his breath. The guy has been home all day, but still hasn't come near the fucking window. The most Jason has seen of him is a hand, which would not be a fatal wound if shot. “Jesus, dude, don't you smoke?”

“Why?” asks a voice behind him. “Need a light?”

Jason has just enough time to groan “aww, shit” before he is picked up by the back of his jacket and hauled around to face a group of very large thugs. The second he sees them he memorizes their locations and number and then hefts his rifle backward before it can be grabbed (Amateurs. Always take the gun first.) and shoots the guy behind him. He doesn't know if he gets the guy's ear or his whole skull; all he knows is the guy drops him and there are too many healthy stooges in front of him to stop and check.

He rushes directly forward, and they rush for him, and the guy directly in front of him makes a grab for Jason's rifle, but Jason isn't stupid enough to shoot close range with a bulky, awkward sniper rifle if he doesn't have to. Instead, he throws it into the air, ducks under the guy's arm, catches it by the wrong end, and clubs the guy over the head with the rifle butt. He takes the goons’ brief moment of surprise to drop the rifle, pull his pistols from his shoulder holsters and -

A flash of green light has him falling on his ass in what he highly suspects to be a small hill in
“Harley, someone had better be dying,” Jason snarls, putting his pistols away first before standing up. His guns are not registered as he has a high probability of leaving them at the crime scene, and he has no carry permit because he's legally dead, so it would be very, very bad if a cop asked why he had them out in a public park in broad daylight.

When he turns, he faces Jade Harley and, to his surprise, Raven. To his even greater surprise, Raven is wearing a tank top and jeans to blend in with the crowd. She looks… normal. Very… normal.

It takes Jason a few seconds to realize Harley has replied to him. “What?” he asks.

Her ears and tail, which had been tucked down morosely, perk up briefly to communicate curiosity before tucking back down again. “Oh, um, I said you weren't doing anything important?” At Jason's glare, she quickly amends, “Um, I mean, so Raven thought we should take you with us, and when I was using my powers to locate you, I told her you were laying on a roof like a sniper so you were probably working, and she said that we should just wait for you to finish, so we hung out for a couple hours, and then those guys came to beat you up, so she said that meant your job was over, and I could bring you.”

Jason turned skeptically to Raven. “You've been hanging out here in the park for hours?”

“Less than two hours, yes.”

“In the sunlight?”

Raven rolls her eyes. “I keep telling you that I'm not a vampire,” she says.

“I keep not believing you,” he counters.

“You've still got the helmet on,” she points out, and she reaches out to tap on the red steel shell.

“What do you need me for that doesn't require the helmet?” he asks, genuinely confused now.

“We're looking for a dog!” Jade informs him brightly.

Jason shoots Raven a look he knows the empath will sense, even if it isn't visible with his helmet still on. She simply shrugs passively and says, “You weren't doing anything important.”

“I was about to kill a rapist.”

“No, you were about to fail to kill a rapist.”

Jason sighs heavily. She's right, though he'd never say it out loud. There was definitely no way he was going to hit his target at home now that he'd been caught. And he wasn't even guaranteed to have survived that fight, so he should probably be grateful for this idiotic interruption. “Fine,” he growls. “Where did Harley lose her dog?”

Jade tilts her head in confusion, the exact same sort of face a dog would make. “I don't have a dog,” she says. “Well, I mean I do, but I'm him now.”

“But you just said…”

“'I'm afraid our intent must have been miscommunicated,’ Raven tells him. ‘We aren't looking for a lost dog. We're going to be examining strays while looking to find a suitable dog for a friend. Finding dogs she hasn't met and returning tagged ones to their addresses allows Jade to work on fine-
tuning her abilities.”

“I even got a multi-frequency RFID scanner!” Jade says, holding up what looks a lot like a barcode scanner.

“For… stealing credit card information?” Jason says, even more confused than he was before.

Jade makes a face. “What? No, to read pet microchips, dummy!” she says, already heading south-south-west on, as far as Jason can tell, random whim. Raven begins following after her. “You're so weird,” Jade the dog, girl, god, and dinosaur hunter informs him.

“Then why did you bring me?” he demands.

“You weren't doing anything,” Raven reminds him, which is not actually an answer. Grumbling, Jason treks after them. He finally takes off his helmet and tucks it under his arm so it might pass as a motorcycle helmet.

After about a minute, Jade stops and looks embarrassed. A few yards ahead of them is a jogger with her Rottweiler. “Oh, oops, he's leashed,” Jade says.

Jason groans and runs a hand over his face, convinced that this is going to be a very long and very stupid day. Raven, however, is undeterred. She suggests, “Perhaps, you should try sensing ones that are not in the immediate proximity of humans.”

“Oh! Yeah, um, okay.” Jade pauses with her eyes closed and makes a constipated face. Jason may or may not snicker at her due to having the sense of humor of an antisocial six year old. Jade suddenly goes on point. “That way!”

They spend about forty minutes in the park and another couple hours in the streets, tracking strays. At Jason's ever-increasing discomfort, Raven promises to let him know if she senses one of his family members in proximity. Jason eventually lets Jade captchalogue his helmet for convenience. He also eventually asks why they're walking all over Gotham when Jade can teleport. Jade points out that the dogs aren't that far apart and teleporting directly in front of them could scare them. Raven points out that Jade herself “needs walking.”

“Hey, is that a dog joke? That's mean!” Jade teases back, sticking her tongue out.

“Jade, you are bouncing,” Raven points out, looking somewhat amused.

Jade looks down to consider herself, as though she's unaware of her own hyperactivity. “Oh, huh. Maybe I do need walking,” she decides.

In the hours of looking, Jason even tries to get out of it by taunting Jade. “Hey, so you know how pig meat is called pork and cow meat is called beef?” he says. “What do you call dog meat?”

Jade stops and for a second, he thinks she's going to yell at him, which will make Raven send him home. Instead, though, she tilts her head pensively and says, completely unbothered, “I think it's just called dog meat?”

But neither of those incidents highlight what Jason is beginning to call, in his mind, 'the weird part.' True to their word, the majority of the time is spent checking for tags and chips. Dogs with owners are sent back to their owners. But the dogs without…

It seems Jade and Raven have compiled a list of shelters to teleport strays to (“To avoid overwhelming any single facility,” Raven explains.), but before they do so Jade starts testing the dog
to see if it’s suitable for her friend. She makes loud noises at it, makes sudden moves at it, tests its sight and scent, and, on a few occasions, even has Jason fire a shot into the air to see if the dog flinches. (They always do. You’d think they’d be used to gunshots in Gotham.)

Aside from the ability to fire a gun (which he knows damn well Jade can also do), he still has no idea why Raven wanted to bring him along. Until, that is, Jade seems satisfied with one particular mutt, then, for the first time the entire day, turns to Jason and asks his opinion.

He is the friend. They have conspired to make him get a dog, and obviously think finding one half-starved on the street will endear him to it. “Fuck you,” he says, and he turns on his heel and storms out of the alleyway and back onto the street.

Not a moment later, Raven catches up to him without Jade. “Jason—”

“You could've just asked me,” he snarls. “I would have told you I don't want a fucking dog.”

“Jason, you need a companion,” she says. She places a cool hand on his shoulder, and he—

“STOP IT!” he snarls, grabbing her wrist and pulling her against a wall. Other people on the sidewalk scramble out of the way and a couple debate calling the police. He ignores them. “Stop manipulating me! Stop messing with my head!”

Raven's eyes widen, looking like she's been slapped, but then they harden again, angry. “You always go for the gullet, don't you, Jason? But I know that is not what I have done. I have been so very careful to avoid it. Every time I soothe your emotions, it is either with your expressed permission or because you're about to have a meltdown, and even then we talk about it afterward.”

“And tricking me into getting a dog isn’t manipulative?”

“Jason, I cannot trick you into getting a dog,” Raven snaps, exasperated. “How do you think that works? I'll just somehow get you to neglect to notice the animal living with you and following you everywhere?”

“What do you want from me?” he demands. “I can't take care of someone else!”

“It's supposed to take care of you, Jason.”

Jason's anger drops abruptly in favor of surprise, which then crumbles beneath the feeling of being drowned, alone and without hope or help. He steps back away from her.

“Jason, I—”

“You're already tired of me.”

“No, I—”

“Jason! Raven!” Jade cries, and both turn from their squabble to the broad, muscular teenager who suddenly looks so small and fragile as she stands there in the middle of the sidewalk, hugging herself and crying. There's blood smeared on her bare legs. “Please, I need—”

“What the fuck?” Jason demands. “We left you alone for less than five minutes!”

“Please!” she begs, and suddenly she's pulling him back down the street, in a different direction than where they had been, and he lets her because it's obvious that something is very, very wrong.

Jade leads them to an alley out by a warehouse that reeks of rotten meat. There's a big dumpster, and
Jason is certain he knows what he'll find. He pulls Jade to a stop, though it's possible she's already seen it. “Jade, stop. Stay here,” he orders her firmly.

And then he steps up to the dumpster and lifts the lid. The dumpster is approximately half full of dog corpses, all severely maimed and some of them misshapen. “Welcome to Gotham City,” he sighs, letting the lid drop again. He looks around them. There's probably a dog fighting arena in one of these warehouses. He considers his resources to try to figure out the next move, and he turns to Jade to ask for his helmet back, but she's not where he left her. Raven is looking at the ground near him, and he looks down to see Jade on her hands and knees peering under the dumpster. There's a trail of blood she's kneeling in, which explains the smears on her legs.

“Come on, boy, come on,” she urges, making clucking sounds and reaching under the dumpster to entice something out. “Come on, buddy, you can do it. Come on.”

Jason bends to look under the dumpster. There is, in fact, a dog wedged under there, the source of the blood trail. Likely, he'd been just strong enough to escape the people (if you could even call them 'people') throwing the dogs away and had wedged itself under the dumpster, just out of reach, to try to stay safe.

“I can move the dumpster,” Raven suggests. So can Jade, actually. Either she's too distressed to think of it, or she can't stand the idea of interacting with it.

Jason shakes his head. “Hold on a sec.” He kneels at the side of the dumpster, closer to the dog than the front where Jade is trying to coax it out. He removes his glove and stretches to reach as far under as possible, his fingertips barely grading the dog's chest.

Its body isn't cold yet, but it's completely still. Pushing harder, Jason can't get it to flinch, much less breathe. Likely, Jade had discovered this site in the dog's last moments, which have now expired.

With a sigh, Jason stands again. “Jade, that dog is dead.”

“No, no, it's okay, because we're here now, we can just—”

“Jade, I'm sorry, but it's seriously fucking dead.”

Jade sobs, still wiggling her fingers under the dumpster like she can entice the dog to come out. “No, no, it can't be. It can't…”

Raven kneels next to the girl and gently pulls her out from dumpster. Jade barely resists, pliable in her grief, and she lets Raven pull her tight against Raven's chest while she sobs. Raven looks up helplessly at him. “What do we do?” she mouths up at him.

Jason scowls and looks around. They're in the warehouse district, so the ring could be anywhere. “Jade? Helmet?”

Jade sniffles and pulls a card deck out of some hidden pocket. She picks out a card with his helmet printed on it, flips it with practiced fluidity, and hands him his helmet (the card now has no image). Captchaloguing makes even less sense than Raven's magic cloak, and it deepens his scowl, but he takes the helmet anyway. “Do you want to stay here?” he asks as he carefully wedges the helmet open. The seam is hair thin and follows the line of the jaw.

“What are you going to do?” asks Jade.

“Find the dog fighting ring that did this and gut some fuckers,” he tells her. He puts on the helmet so he can pretend not to notice Raven's disapproving frown. If she isn't going to hang with him
anymore, why does he have to care what she thinks?

“Okay,” says Jade, and she pulls herself to her feet and changes costume in a shimmer of green energy, now clothed as Ms. Witch.

That surprises him. He’d been pretty sure that she was on Team High And Mighty. “Uh, Jade, there is a high probability of me murdering at least some of these guys.”

She looks confused. “I spent hours waiting for you to finish shooting somebody, Ja- Red Hood,” she says. “I know what it is you do.”

“But - ”

“I am both a dog and a human. Not part dog and part human. A dog and a human. And both sides are equally horrified by this crime,” she says. “I may not intend to kill people myself if I don't have to, but I'm sure as hell gonna put my teeth in their throat, and I can't say I mind what you do any more at this moment than I have at others. So please stop wasting time, and tell me what we do.”

Jason looks her over for a moment, deciding. “You’re full dog in there? Got the senses and everything?” he asks, and she nods. “Alright, then. See if you can track which warehouse they’re in. We're looking for animal smells, blood and waste, meat, dogs barking, that kind of thing.” He turns to Raven. “You can go-”

“Once you've found your location, I can act as lookout,” she offers, standing again. She manifests her usual cloak from the shadows, but as her shirt and jeans are real, she is unable to replace them with her usual dress. The combination makes her look like a LARPer, and Jason pulls his phone out to take a pic.

“Do as you like,” he says, putting his phone away again. He'll send the pic to Roy and Kori later. “Jade?” he asks, and then he practically squeaks in surprise as Jade lights with green fire, the fur on her ears and tail along with the light hair across her skin all standing on end. There's a twist to her lips and an inhuman snarl bubbling from somewhere deep within her.

And then suddenly they're outside of an entirely different warehouse. Sure enough, it stinks of death and animal waste and they can hear dogs barking inside. Raven promptly disappears in a poof of smoke. Jade starts toward the nearest door, but Jason grabs her. “Hey, I totally get wanting to rip them to shreds, but I also want to do it from an advantageous position instead of disadvantageous one,” he hisses. “So shut down your reactor? There's a small chance this counts as heroic, you know.” If Jade dies picking a fight with a dog fighting ring, he'll never hear the end of it.

Jade glares at him, but the green fire disappears, and suddenly he's left with a sulky teenager again. He nods and begins to approach the door. “Okay, follow my lead,” he tells her.

Keeping an eye out for trouble, they move quickly to the door. It's locked, but that's not the main issue. Jason presses his ear to the door and, sure enough, he hears the voices of humans very strongly. He shakes his head and motions her on. “Next one,” he says.

Next one turns out to be a supplies closet with no interior door. He shuts the door with a grumble. “Next one.”

Jade looks down the wall and tilts her head again. “Next door that's a regular door or next door which is that big garage door right here?”

“Uh I mean the regular door, but I guess we can check the garage door,” he says.
“I don’t think there’s any humans in that area,” Jade says, closing her eyes to concentrate. “I really think they’re all closer to the real doors? Offices maybe?”

Jason presses his ear to the garage door. Indeed, he does not hear humans, and the dogs sound louder here. “I guess this is where they keep the dogs. Can you get it unlocked?”

Jade concentrates again. “The, um, door control apparatus? I think maybe I can shrink it? Which would effectively break it,” she suggests, and Jason nods in agreement that she should do that. She makes a vague gesture, concentrating, and Jason can hear the groaning sounds of twisted metal.

KR-KRASH! tinktinktinktinktinktink tink tink tink tink tink tink tinktinktinktinktinktinktink tink tink tink

“Did you just drop it?”

“I might have dropped it.”

Both Jason and Jade duck to opposite sides of the garage for cover and pull their guns out, prepared to be attacked now that they’ve announced themselves. But nothing happens, aside from a huge increase to the volume and ferocity of barking.

Jason looks toward Jade. Jade looks toward Jason. They shrug. If, somehow, that hadn’t attracted anyone to check things out, then they might as well move forward.

Jade makes another gesture and the garage door slides up and several somethings lunge out at them. Jason shoots on instinct, but the beasts are gone in a green flash. Confused, he turns to Jade, who is frowning at three small objects floating in front of her. “Red Hood, look at this,” she says.

“Just a second.” Before he crosses in front of the garage, he wants to see if there are any further threats or traps waiting. He turns to face the dark instead of the daylight and turns on the night vision in his helmet.

The garage is actually pretty small. Probably sectioned off to give room for the arena somewhere in the building. It's mostly full of dog cages, though there also looks to be crates of various supplies. In the center, the slightly smaller garage door controls had fallen onto a row of cages, causing three to open. In the unopened cages, hulking beasts barked at him with salivating maws. “What the fuck?”

“Red Hood,” Jade says again, and he almost forgets to turn off his night vision before turning to her. Working in daylight hours is a pain in the ass. She's next to him now and displays the floating objects for him to see.

They're dogs. But they're overburdened with muscle, twisting their forms into something grotesque. They salivate and desperately try to attack despite being held floating in the air in a miniature size that must make Jason and Jade look like towering giants.


Jade frowns at her mini-beasts. “It'll wear off, though, right?”

“I dunno,” he admits. “It doesn't always. Send them to dinosaur island; they'll fit in there and not bother anyone. You can check on them later.”

Jade seems doubtful, but the animals do disappear in another green flash. He heads inside the garage, turning his night vision on again on a low intensity so the sun-filled doorway will bother him less. Jade follows him in.
The central row is of venom-dogs (dogbane?) frothing at the mouth and desperate to get at the newcomers. The cages have been reinforced with extra mesh on the sides to keep the dogs from reaching each other. Several have torn holes in the mesh trying anyway. One of the dogs that tried to tear through now has a bloody maw with wire stuck in its lip, and it doesn't seem to notice at all.

For now, they leave those where they are.

Moving on, they find several cages of bait animals. Just whatever happened to be in easy access. There's some humane traps with rats in them, and the juxtaposition makes Jason want to laugh until he cries, even if he knows the traps are just intended so the rats can be fed to the dogs. Along one wall, Jason finds a row of cages for venom-dosed roosters.

“I think whatever entity constructed this world fucked up badly,” he grumbles, glaring at the hell-chickens. Jade just shifts her weight nervously beside him.

Eventually, they find the bait dogs. Strays who haven't been dosed all shoved into a big pen at the far end of the garage. The German Shepherd that stands guard of the door, barking at them and constantly dodging left and right to stay between the humans and the dogs, warms Jason's cold zombie heart just a little bit. “Break the door off,” he tells Jade.

She starts shrinking the door which makes the parts attached to the sidewalls of the pen creak and groan. But soon they snap, and Jade tosses the door aside. Several dogs immediately run out, which causes the ragged German Shepherd to frantically run back and forth between Jason and Jade, barking at them to keep them aback from its friends. Jason holds his hands up in a show of innocence.

“No!” Jade hisses at him. “You’re making yourself look bigger. Turn away and look disinterested!” She demonstrates by returning her attention to the hell-chickens.

“Yeah, and then he can attack me from behind.”

“Dogs almost never attack from behind. It's a disadvantageous position.”

That sounds fake, but Jason does see that the German Shepherd is now only sometimes checking Jade’s activity instead of dividing its attention evenly. He sighs and turns back toward the pen, and which just incites the dog more, and it runs back into the pen to- Oh, there are still dogs in there. Some injured, some just malnourished, others simply afraid of the new humans. These dogs are taking longer to leave. They could haul them out one by one, but he’d probably get mauled by the German Shepherd for his efforts. They could also have Jade teleport them to shelters, but…

Jason sights another door nearby. Well, they found the dogs. Time to deal with the humans. And it should give the German Shepherd enough time to get its friends out. “Witch, stay here and keep an eye on things,” he orders, and he makes his way for the door.

With his ear pressed to the door, he can hear the muffled sounds of human speech, maybe an argument, but there is a surprising lack of commotion for all the noise he and Jade and the dogs have been making. He reaches for the knob and carefully tests if it will turn. It is, in fact unlocked, and he carefully turns it all the way before bracing himself and throwing it open, both pistols drawn on the room.

Poison Ivy turns to him from where she's holding a syringe up to a crying man trusted up in vines, a vine in his mouth preventing screams. She raises an eyebrow.

“Uh,” Jason says as his brain grinds to a halt, completely unprepared for this development. With
more time, he could have noticed that the entire room was men trussed up in vines, some of them
mutated by venom and hanging dead and others still crying or struggling, and remembered that
Poison Ivy is an eco-terrorist, not a dog abuser. He could have also then remembered who Poison
Ivy’s girlfriend is.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t have the time to notice these things, because Harley Quinn jumps in from
where she’d been out of view and takes a swing at him with a giant fucking mallet.

Jason goes flying. Jade is immediately on Quinn in a flash of green light and fluffy white fury.
Giggling, Quinn keeps just of reach with small bombs and huge hammer swings. Jason has only just
got his breath back, about to sit up, when one of those bombs lands near his head and he has a split
second to roll out of the way as it goes off.

Coughing and trying to get his feet under him again, Ivy’s vines snap him by the throat and lift him
into the air, forcing him to drop his pistols in order to grab the vine in an attempt to stave off
strangulation. She steps closer to him, kicks his guns aside, and peers up at him with a sneer. “They
say you’re a killer of killers,” she says. “No one said you were an abusive gambler.”

He would like to protest the charges and to demand why Ivy suddenly cares about mammalian well-
being, but he finds himself somewhat hindered by the vegetal noose around his neck, so he kicks her
in the tit instead. She kicks his guns aside, and he cries out and nearly lets go and

Where the

fuck is Raven? Luckily, he’s got a partner that he hears growling somewhere out of his currently
limited vision. (Though he does have an excellent view of the ceiling if anyone decides to attack
from there.)

Ivy's gaze drops, and she looks disdainfully confused instead of threatened as she sneers, “What do
you want?”

“RRRRRR-RAWR RAWR RAWR!” That… that does not sound like Jade.

“Get! Shoo!” Ivy insists, and then she makes the mistake of making a kicking motion at the dog
below Jason in her attempt to shoo it away.

The dog snaps at her ankle, dropping her to her knees, and Jason kicks off her shoulders to twist
upside down in a maneuver he will never admit to having learned from Dick Grayson, and thus
forces the vines to loosen so he can get his head out. He then swings and drops to the floor. “OW!
FUCK!” Well, if that ankle wasn't sprained before, it is now.

The dog dodges another fake-kick (Ivy wouldn't rescue a dog just to kick it, but she appears to have
no idea how to handle them either.), barks at her, and then carefully picks up one of Jason's pistols in
its mouth and runs to Jason with it. Jason stares at it. The dog sits on its haunches with the gun still in
its mouth, waiting to be rewarded.

“What the fuck?!” Ivy demands, deeply offended by the dog's behavior. “HARLEY, HANDLE
THIS MUTT!”

“I'M BUSY!” both Harley Quinn and Ms. Witch answer from somewhere nearby.

Ivy startles at that and then casts a questioning look at Jason. He sighs heavily and tells her, “Ms.
Witch’s name may or may not be Harleen.”

“Wait… Ms. Witch? The heroine?”

“Yeah, sometimes the good guys agree with me about who deserves to be shot in the face,” Jason
says, hands on his hips. “For example… Oh, I dunno, the animal fighting ring operators.”
Ivy strokes her temple, her cheeks coloring just a little bit greener. “You weren't helping them,” she says.

“I definitely was not, and I'm kind of offended that you thought so,” Jason tells her.

Ivy sighs, then shouts, “HARLEY QUINN, GET YOUR BUTT BACK HERE! THEY'RE ON OUR SIDE!”

The German Shepherd is still sitting expectantly in front of Jason, though it is now casting dubious glances between Ivy and Jason, trying to figure out what's happening. Gingerly, Jason takes the gun and pats the dog on the head. “Good d—” He doesn't even get to finish the praise before the dog has gone to fetch the other pistol.

“Looks like you've made a friend!” Jade exclaims as she and Harley appear in a flash next to them.

“Shut your face,” Jason says in a stunning display of verbally articulate poetry.

“You done in there?” Harley Quinn asks her girlfriend, indicating the vine-wrapped office with her thumb.

“Not yet, no,” says Ivy. She glances to Jason and nods toward the door. “Unless you want to…?”

“I appreciate the offer, but fish in a barrel isn't really my style,” Jason tells her.

“Man, I getcha,” Harley agrees amicably, “but Red here could torture men all day! Has a real knack for it, you know?” Her tone says that if this were a text conversation, that statement would have been surrounded by heart, flower, and kiss emojis. Maybe some fruits and vegetables for good measure.

“Yuh-huh,” says Jason blandly. He wants to get out of this conversation — and out of this hellhole — as quickly as possible. “So we'll just do one more sweep of the animals, take the dosed dogs into custody, and leave you to your fun.”

Ivy nods. “Fine by me,” she says. She pulls her girlfriend back into the office and shuts the door behind them. Are they torturing bad men or about to have pervy sex? The world may never know.

“So what are you going to name him?” Jade asks, drawing Jason's attention back to her.

“What?” he asks, and she points down at his feet, where the German Shepherd is sitting on its haunches again, waiting for him to take his other pistol.

“Dogmeat,” he says because it's honestly the first thing that pops into his head. He takes the pistol from it and gives it a reluctant pat on the head.

Several minutes later, Jade has captchalogued the cages of dosed dogs and chickens to take to the Watchtower and all the other animals have been set free. When Jason exits the warehouse alone, Raven materializes next to him. The cloak has disappeared again, making her look once more shockingly normal. He grimaces and keeps walking, ignoring the fact that Dogmeat is still following him. Raven follows, too. “Nice job on lookout,” he grumbles.

“That sounded sarcastic…” she says in a tone that makes it clear that she doesn't understand why he's being sarcastic.

“Dude, I got my ass handed to me by Poison Ivy!”

“You were on the same side,” she reminds him. “I monitored to see if I was needed, but you had it
“She nearly strangled me!”

“You had it handled.”

“Right, because you know better than me about what I need,” Jason huffs angrily. He starts back down the sidewalk toward the city proper. When a hot dog seller gives him a strange look, he finally remembers to take off his helmet again and shakeout his hair. Raven's still following him. He pretends not to notice. So is the dog.

“I'm sorry,” she says at last, and that makes him stop and turn to her again. She's looking at the ground and not at him, gripping her arms self-consciously. “I… You're right. It was pretty manipulative to lie about why I brought you. Or… not tell the truth. I was trying to be careful, but it was all a pile of excuses because, like you said, I thought I knew better than you, and I didn't take your consent into consideration where it wasn't convenient.”

Jason shrugs and watches a passing car. Next to him, Dogmeat sits again and starts scratching at its ear. He better not get fleas. “Yeah, well, I guess I expected too much,” he mumbles. “You don't have to take me on an elaborate hunt for a pet just because you're tired of my shit.”

“Jason!” she exclaims, and when he looks at her again, she is clearly utterly exasperated. He knows the expression well due to the frequency with which he receives it from everyone he knows. “I am not replacing myself with a dog. That was never what this was about!”

He blinks at her, genuinely lost in the conversation now. “Then what was it about?” he asks, resisting the urge to be relieved that she still wants to stick with him.

She sighs heavily, starts to explain, and then is bumped into by a man running to catch a cab that apparently went to the wrong street. She glares after him, then turns back to Jason. “Would you like to do this somewhere more private?” she asks, and he shrugs, because the first comment to pop in his head probably would not be appreciated at the moment.

There's a swirl of fog, and then he finds himself standing on a beach in a hot red sunset. “Please tell me this isn't Dinosaur Island,” he says, noting the lack of other beach-goers.

“It's a construct, actually,” she explains. “We’re currently between dimensions.”

The German Shepherd whines and ducks its head against the sand before digging its shoulder in and then flipping over. It then flops onto its belly and looks up pathetically at Jason. “I'm not sure Dogmeat likes being between dimensions,” he says.

Raven settles herself down onto the sand in the most prim manner possible and looks up at him doubtfully. “You’re not really going to keep that name, are you?”

Jason shrugs. “Seems appropriate, considering where he came from, and it'll probably annoy Damian.”

“Damian?”

“The latest Robin? Fucking loves animals, so I'll dump Dogmeat off on him.”

“Ah.”

Jason sat next to her on the sand, slightly less than arm's length apart. “So, what was this about
Raven pulls her legs to her chest and sets her chin on her knees. “I like what we were doing, Jason,” she says. “I do. It feels nice to be needed, and the way you feel about me when I help you… that feels nice, too. But, it was beginning to feel codependent. I worried about leaving you on your own, which is… And then there’s the times that you exploded at me, and even though I knew you didn’t mean it and we always make up, it still hurts when it happens, and I don’t like to soothe your pain right after you’ve dealt an emotional blow to me.”

Jason looks away and finds Dogmeat sitting on the other side of him. Tentatively, he begins to pet it. “Yeah, I know,” he admits. “Kinda why I expected you to leave.”

“I don’t need to leave, Jason,” she says. “I just need the ability to take care of myself without feeling guilty over you. And even if that wasn’t the case, a well-matched dog has the potential to be better for you than I am.”

He looks at her again. “Really?”

Raven looks amused. “This wasn’t a random whim, Jason,” she says. “I did my research. An emotional support dog is far more reliable than human - or half-human, as the case may be - empathy, able to offer constant and unconditional love without being worn out by it. There’s actually been a lot of research into their ability to help soldiers cope with trauma.”

Jason raises an eyebrow at that. “You see me as a soldier?” he asks.

And she tells him honestly, “I see you as a war.”

Jason lies back on the sand to watch a sunset that never actually finishes setting and a flock of birds above them that somehow never get any further away. Next to him, Dogmeat starts affectionately licking his elbow. “Hey, Raven?”

“Yes, Jason?”

“I don’t think I’m gonna give the dog to Damian.”

Raven lies back on the sand next to him. Her fingertips graze his. “If you think that’s for the best,” she says. But her voice is smiling.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

“Hi, honey,” says Tarantula, grinning down at him. And then she delivers a hard kick to his stomach and he loses his grip and he’s falling.
You, Me, I, You

Chapter Notes

Warning for conversation about canonical rape.
-
Lyrics based on Estelle's "You Are", which I consider a good davekat song, but with some choice word change, it easily becomes an hilarious hateflirting song for Damara to taunt Condy with.
-
Updating the next few chapters quickly to close up this arc. The last portion of this story will take a while to flesh out, write, and post.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You and me are everything. Everyone can see. Even without blindness goggles. It's you and me. So when I say I miss you babe, it means I hate your face. Might not be perfect, babe, but you make me real…”

“I thought she was supposed to be fake troll Japanese?” Nightwing hears Tim mutter into his headset, using it for purposes other than combat. Possibly to annoy Bruce and possibly to stave off boredom. Probably both.

“East Beforan, yeah,” Nightwing confirms. He and Batgirl are perched in the rigging above each side of the stage, their insignias muted so that they might pass for stagehands to anyone not paying attention. In the daylight, their forms were pretty obvious, but the stage was the attention-getter. Somewhere among the audience were Tim, Damian, and Stephanie in plain clothes. Bruce was backstage ostensibly keeping an eye on his investment, and Kory was with him ostensibly keeping an eye on her model. Damara was on stage performing under the name “The Handmaid” and backed up by a band of Dave (turntables), John (keyboard), and Jade (supposedly that monstrosity is an electric guitar).

“So why is she wearing a cheongsam?” asks Tim.

Below them, Kory tilts her head. “What's wrong with it?” she asks. “I like it.”

“I'm pretty sure it's Chinese,” says Tim. “Maybe Vietnamese? Hold on… yeah, Google says Chinese.”

“Watch the crowd, not your phone or the performance,” Bruce growls.

“The crowd isn't doing anything, though,” Tim objects, and is he purposefully trying to start an argument? Why doesn't he just go find Damian instead of starting it over the communicators?

“Something is happening,” Bruce says, his voice tense.

Nightwing’s attention is immediately back on the crowd, but he sees no general change. “What? Where?”

“I… don’t know,” Bruce admits. “I just… stay vigilant, okay?”
Nightwing glances down to see Bruce rubbing his temples. Kory has noticed and is headed toward him, looking concerned. Nightwing glances across the rigging to Batgirl, since she's fluent in body language, but of course he can't read her face with that mask on. Still, she's leaning down, watching the antics backstage instead of the crowd, which means she's concerned also. (Below, Bruce has shooed Kory away.)

Nightwing has a very bad feeling about this. He's been warned about following gut instinct instead of logic, but he still has a very, very bad feeling. He turns and watches the crowd more closely. He takes it sector by sector. Teenagers. Some old hippies. More teenagers. Adults. Young adults, maybe college age, maybe older. Teenagers.

Nightwing’s attention is diverted momentarily when he feels the rigging shake. He glances toward the source to see stagehand climbing up to adjust the lights. He turns back to the crowd. There's definitely something weird going on with the crowd. They'd been shouting and jumping, but now seem to be losing their enthusiasm.

The stagehand is slightly closer. They're slightly built but muscular with darkish skin and dark brown hair pulled back into a ponytail pulled out the back of their black ball cap. Like all the other stagehands, they wear black jeans and a black t-shirt reading “STAFF” with a company logo in a smaller font. Nightwing shifts to turn his back to them in hopes that they wouldn't notice he is definitely not staff. Bruce had been so sure that they wouldn't need up here again until tear down.

And then two long, twisting poles catch Nightwing’s eye. Poles that are definitely attached to a head. “Shit! He painted his horns! Tim, can y-?” And then a hard kick removes him from his perch. He grabs the rigging badly, wrenching his wrist, but at least he's not falling, and he can face the stagehand who had…

That face.

“Hi, honey,” says Tarantula, grinning down at him. And then she delivers a hard kick to his wrist and he loses his grip and he's falling. He can't react in time. He can't think. His mind is a stuck gear, unable to overcome Tarantula’s grinning face.

Kory catches him and rolls a few feet to distribute the force of his fall. She rolls to a stop on top of him, face confused and questioning. “Dick, what-?”

“GET OFF!” he shouts at her, and he's already scrambling out from under her, and she recoils from him, about to say something, when Tarantula, t-shirt now ditched to show off her costume, drops down on top of her.

Kory immediately throws Tarantula back onto the ground in what Dick is pretty sure is a wrestling move. His earpiece is pure chaotic noise with everyone shouting. Tim and Stephanie have been caught up in the now angry and distraught crowd, Damian is fighting his way toward the stage where Damara, Dave, John, and Jade are fighting Las Arañas, it can be presumed that Bruce has run off to change costume, and Batgirl has gone into the crowd to try to retrieve Makara.

Anxiety and nausea hits Dick like a tidal wave. He reaches for his sticks, but they're not strapped to his thighs any longer. What-?

The flash of a starbolt draws his attention back to the fight between Tarantula and Kory, and somehow it's even more worrisome than usual that Kory isn't being careful with her identity. But then as Tarantula dodges aside, he sights them. His sticks in Tarantula's belt.

Another wave of the chucklevoodoos hit him, and he vomits next to an amplifier. He has to get ahold
of himself, he has to, he has to

He doesn't even register entering the fight. He just knows that suddenly he's got Tarantula by the throat and is hauling her back off Kory. Tarantula isn't nearly as good of a fighter once you've got her in a hold. “Help Spoiler!” he tells Kory.

“But you-!”

“Makara is a higher priority, and you're our powerhouse! Go!” Kory reluctantly obeys. Where the fuck has Bruce -?

And when the fuck did Tarantula **finally** learn how to flip him? “Ow,” he groans, and he tries to roll to his feet, but Tarantula is suddenly straddling his waist. “Nononono!”

She just smirks down at him. “You could have just called, *sugar,*” she teases, and… And there’s something off about it. Something hollow. It isn't like all the other times she taunted him, manipulated him, held him down and—

A metallic blur slices across her chest, forcing her to throw herself backward, and giving Nightwing the opportunity to escape. “You!” she hisses up at Dirk, who isn't even supposed to be here. (He was, but then he was sent back to the manor when he wouldn't stop messing with Dave's equipment.)

“Me, I, You,” he taunts, quoting the song Handmaid had just been singing. Clearly, he had only lost himself in the audience instead of doing as told. No one would be surprised, and, at the moment, Nightwing is grateful.

Tarantula is on her feet again and moves to attack Dirk, but Nightwing twists around back of her and delivers a swift kick to her lower back, shoving her right into Dirk, who takes the opportunity to pull the sticks out of her belt and toss them to Nightwing.

With an angry growl, she pushes away from Dirk and moves to swipe his feet, but he simply hops like he's jumping rope and delivers an elbow to her throat that she barely dodges. And Nightwing is right there, tripping her so she falls back on her ass, and then he is sitting on her waist with his stick pressed up under her throat, just enough to make breathing slightly difficult and moving impossible. “You sure you wanna do this, Tarantula?” he asks.

Tarantula looks absolutely disgusted with him. Good. For once, they are on the same page. “Do I want to work for a fish? Hm… NO,” she snaps. There’s lines at the edge of her mask. Lines in her face, like she’s bleeding, but less organic…

“Well why?” Nightwing demands. If he could just get her mask off…

Tarantula shrugs. “It has its perks,” she says. And then, of all the possible moves she could make, she grabs his ass.

Against his will, Nightwing makes a choking sound and flinches, the brief second of distraction just enough to throw him off-balance (though not off her) so she can roll to the side where Dirk immediately sticks his katana into the stage platform a centimeter from her face.

“You were saying?” Dirk asks, and she glowers up at him as Nightwing pins her hands behind her back.

“We have Makara in custody,” Batman says over the earpiece. “Now dispersing crowds. Most of the arañas have disappeared.”
“Tarantula’s still here,” Nightwing informs him. “D— Prince and I are holding her, but we could use some help in actually taking her into custody.”

“Be right there,” Kory answers immediately.

Tarantula glares up at Dirk. “Prince?” she repeats. “Really?”

“It means I destroy things,” he tells her blandly, and he leans his blade slightly closer to her face.

She huffs out a laugh and glances back at Dick. “So the morals were just for me, then?” she mocks, batting her eyelashes at him.

“Nothing was for you,” he growls. And then Kory shows up and helps pin her down so Dirk can get the shackles on her. By now, her gang has abandoned her. She doesn't actually seem to care. She laughs at them for thinking any of it matters.

_________________________

Dick takes a very, very long shower. Eventually, though, he has to admit that he's going to dissolve if he stays under the spray any longer, and he exits, towels himself off, and gets dressed. If he could have his way, he'd go directly to bed and stay there for at least two days, but his stomach is growling fiendishly at him. And Dick knows from fiends. So he heads down to the kitchen…

…and finds Koriand’r perched on a barstool at the kitchen island with a cereal bowl full of crickets. He raises an eyebrow. “How long was I in the shower?” he asks.

She seems perplexed. “What do you mean?”

He points to her snack. “I know we don't keep those on hand,” he teases her.

“You do, actually,” she tells him. “Alfred fetched them the second everyone settled in.” She rattles the bowl at him, like that's supposed to mean something. “It's the freeze-dried kind. Keeps for ages. And you may recall that I used to be around a lot.”

“That sounds vaguely familiar, yes,” he says. He heads toward the fridge and starts searching for something quick and unhealthy.

“Want some?” Koriand'r offers, shaking the bowl again. “Good post-fight food, full of protein and minerals.”

“Not ever,” he tells her, knowing she won't be offended. “So were you just hanging around until I finally came out again, or what?”

If Dick had had a suspicion that Kori had more serious topics in mind, he gets his confirmation when she doesn't answer him. He glances past the fridge door to see her stirring the bowl with one finger while she frown-pouts down at it.

He sighs heavily and grabs the unopened pint of chocolate milk. It's supposed to be for Damian but fuck it, Dick has earned chocolate milk today. He closes the fridge door, pops the top off his milk, takes a long swig, and asks, “You wanna talk don't you?”

Her frown deepens. “You don't have to if you don't want to,” she says, and he knows it's true. Kori would never make him do anything he didn't want to. She's a good friend that he doesn't deserve.

“Didn't they give you the run-down on Tarantula?”

She nods. “She was the one who helped you in Bludhaven. You attempted to train her. But she'd
been pretty villainous from the start, playing the hero game to try to catch your eye. You also dated her, but-

“I did not date Tarantula,” Dick says and surprises himself with the way he snarls it out.

She looks up at him, surprised, then looks away in mild embarrassment. “Oh, um, Bruce thought you did.”

Dick makes a noise of disgust. Bruce is a detective, so he wouldn't jump to that conclusion randomly. Catalina must have told him they dated, and Bruce had taken Dick’s animosity as confirmation of a bad break up.

“Anyway,” Kori says a bit anxiously, “that's all the information he had, but I got the impression there's more to it. I think he's now thinking that too, even though I didn't say anything. I wouldn't…”

“What gave you that impression?” Dick asks stiffly, though he knows that fight hadn't exactly been subtle, most of the others had not been paying attention to him while it took place.

She gives him a dubious look. “She had the upperhand on you from the very start, despite being less talented than you, and Makara's abilities quite obviously affected you worse.”

“I wouldn't say that,” Dick protests with a scowl.

Her look, if possible, becomes even more skeptical. “You threw up on that speaker.”

Oh right. That was a thing that had happened.

“Look, if you don't want to talk to me-”

“I don't,” he says too quickly.

Kori looks hurt, but she nods, accepting. She stands and takes her bowl.

“No, that's not what-” Dick groans and runs a hand back through his hair. He leans against the fridge, desperately trying to gather his thoughts. He can't stand the idea of her thinking again that he hates her. “I just… I can't… I can't talk about this with you, okay? I- You've always seen through me, and I can't… I don't want you to see this.”

Koriand'r has abandoned her crickets on the kitchen island to come around close to him. Not too close yet, not enough to come across as pushy or clingy, but enough to show her support. “Dick, I have never minded what I've seen in you, good or bad,” she tells him. “You have always been so wonderfully, beautifully yourself. I couldn't ask for anything else.”

“I know that, I just…” He looks above her head to the cabinets. “You… God, you've always been so strong, you know? So much better than me.” He glances down to see her scowl at that, but he assures her, “I mean that in a good way. I like that about you. That I could rely on you. You're super-powered, perceptive, beautiful, kind, confident, and uncompromising. And you…” He sighs and looks away again. “You would've handled it differently.”

She just looks at him with confusion. “How's that?” she asks.

He buries his face in his hands. This is why he didn't want to talk to Kori. It's very hard to keep the truth from her. “… You would have fought back.”

There is a very, very long moment of silence in which Dick refuses to look up. He doesn't want to
see the face she's making. Confusion turning to realization turning to horror turning to pity.

“Richard John Grayson,” she bites out slowly and carefully, “I want it noted that I am trying very hard not to hit you.”

That startles him out of his sulk, and he gawks at her. “What did I do?” he demands.

But she isn't just mad at him; she's furious. Her eyes are lit vivid green, and she pokes him in the chest with a finger buzzing with energy that may or may not give him sunburn through his shirt. “How dare you make assumptions on parts of my life that we never talked in detail about!” she snaps. “I understand you think you’re complimenting me, but you are being incredibly insulting! You think I took imprisonment, rape, and torture in stride?! You think because I am ‘strong’ that I would not be sympathetic? That isn't what strength is, and it has never been who I am you-you-YOU GIANT NINCOMPOOP!”

Dick blinks at her in disbelief. “... Nincompoop?” he asks.

She scowls down at him, making their height difference seem much bigger than it actually is. “I'm too angry for a good insult,” she informs him. She closes her eyes and forces herself to take a deep breath. “Too angry and too hurt.”

Dick really feels like throwing up now. Good job, him. “You're right,” he says, sounding about as small as he feels. “I wasn't thinking.”

“You were thinking badly,” she corrects. She sends him a sidelong glance of disapproval. “Did you really believe that I would hear of this and say ‘well, you should have tried harder not to be raped, then’? Really, Dick?”

Dick scowls now. He sighs and steps away from her, pacing the kitchen because he doesn't want to stand there anymore. “It wasn’t…” he starts. He doesn't continue the statement, because he's not sure of its truth anymore, though he had been sure just a day ago.

Funny how your perspective changes so quickly when you're forced to actually look.

“Wasn't what?” Koriand’r asks, her voice softer now. “Wasn't rape? I'm sorry if I misinterpreted, but I-.”

“You didn't,” he tells her quickly. With a sigh, he sits at the bar stool next to the one she had vacated, a clear invitation for her to join him, and she does. He doesn't look at her, though, instead looking down at his clasped hands. “It... maybe it was,” he admits. “It's just hard to... I guess it was easier to think of it as sex I didn't want.”

“... That is literally the definition of rape.”

“I am aware, Star.”

A long silence passes between them, not at all comfortable but not exactly uncomfortable either. Finally, Koriand’r says, ‘Look, for things like this, what I usually say - and it's still true - is ‘you don't have to tell me if you don't want to.’ I mean, I know I tend to boil what happened to me down to a sentence or two. But, Dick…” She sighs again and moves her hand next to his, a millimeter from touching in order to make the choice of physical comfort entirely his. “It... It doesn't seem like not telling has been very helpful to you.”

Dick almost laughs at that. Understatement of the year. He takes a deep breath, steels himself, then spends so long trying to think of what to say that he has to take several more deep breaths. Finally,
he says, “She… It…” He makes a vague gesture. “Fuzzy. I don't remember the truth so well, but… She wanted to kill him. She told me it was my job to convince her not to, to keep her held back. She… I don't remember who actually did it. I was upset, though. I was upset with the person I was becoming. That I wasn't making her better, she was pulling me down. I… I didn't get far from the scene. I couldn't. My body wasn't working. I couldn't think enough to make it work. I just didn't want to exist anymore. Didn't want to be a person who would let her…

“She… She told me it was alright. That I was stronger now. That we had done the right thing. I think I was laying in the street? I remember asphalt. She started touching me, telling me how much she loved me and how long she'd been waiting for me to come around. I asked her to stop, but I didn't stop her. She told me everything would be fine. I think I told her to stop after she, uh, mounted.” Another vague gesture. “But at that point, I didn't know up from down anymore. Everything got mixed up and it…” He shrugs. “It just seemed easier to let it happen.”

Koriand'r nods but doesn't say anything right away. She tips her palm open to remind him that it's available, and this time he takes it. He squeezes it tighter than he means to, but she doesn't mind. Finally, she says, “Can I ask you something that is probably not a comfortable question?”

Dick shrugs. “Might as well. We're not on a comfortable topic.”

“Do… Do you not want to kill her?”

Dick scowls at the cabinetry ahead of them. “I kind of wish she'd spontaneously stop existing,” he admits. “But I don't want to kill her, no.” He takes his hand back from Kori to stare at it, seeing something she doesn't, perhaps some imagined stain. “I don't know, Kori. After I started in Bludhaven… I got some better perspective. I think I understand your point of view a little better now, but I… I could just never imagine myself making that decision, being confident in my right and ability to make that decision. And now after… I can't stand the thought of her being right about me. Even if it means letting her get away with it.”

“Living doesn't mean she's getting away with it,” she reminds him.

He just shrugs and wipes his eyes. “Hey, so sudden change of topic, there is something I've been meaning to ask you about,” he tells her as he fishes around in his pocket for his phone.

“Oh?” she asks, letting him drop the conversation in favor of a safer topic.

“Yeah.” He starts tapping and swiping at his phone, looking for something. “So there was recently an attack on what turned out to be a dog fighting ring. Jade brought the venom-dosed animals to the watchtower for analysis, so I imagine you know about it. Thing is most of the people there that night were murdered by Poison Ivy, so we started pulling camera footage from the nearby area to find out exactly went down since Jade was a little cagey.”

Koriand'r rolls her eyes. “I think she just doesn't want to get in trouble for not arresting or even stopping Ivy and Quinn,” she says. “But I know some more details then she told the League.”

“Cool, then tell me what the fuck this is.” He turns the phone screen toward her to show Red Hood stalking down a sidewalk with Raven, a German Shepherd trotting along after them. Their movements are agitated, hinting an argument. Jason eventually removes his helmet. They talk with less agitation. Then, Raven disappears in a cloud of smoke along with Jason and the dog.

Koriand'r screeches in glee. “That little liar!” she exclaims. “He said he didn't like her! I can't wait to tell Roy!” She's already pulling out her phone and bringing up pesterchum.
Dick stares at her with clear disbelief. “Did you seriously hook up Jason and Raven?” he demands.

Koriand’r snorts. “As buddies, not lovers,” she tells him. “That video looks like she made him get a dog, too. I’m making plans with Roy to crash Jason’s place and tease him and pet his dog. Want in?”

“Damian has a zoo; I’m good,” he tells her. “Is Jason going to steal all my friends?”

She rolls her eyes at him. “When is even the last time you talked to Raven?” she asks. “Besides, I’m sure Donna and Cyborg and Beast Boy and Flash would nev-“ She cuts herself off with a dramatic gasp and jabs her finger at Dick again. “Wally has red hair!” She says it like it’s an accusation.

Dick raises an eyebrow at her. “More than a decade since you first met him, and you’re just now realizing?”

She keeps jabbing him, certain that she’s on to something. “All of your exes have red hair, though!”

Dick laughs. He can't help it. “Yeah, also all of my exes can easily beat me in a fight,” he points out. “Wally cannot.”

She laughs like a moose. It’s adorable and slightly horrifying, like everything else about Koriand’r. “That is your type? Strong redheads?”

Dick nods solemnly. “Learn from my mistakes and never challenge Barbara Gordon to an arm wrestling match.”

“Well, now I have to.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the uncomfortable topic, and yet another chapter that is mostly talking. I just really thought Dick deserved some closure.

Next time on DCstuck:
“You know I cain’t take him, right?” Bro says, toneless and unreadable by default rather than choice.
He hasn't seen Dave since he got yelled at in the weird round room, but if Dave can yell at him, then he's fine. He's healthy, and he's fine, and Bro has done his job. He didn't accept that right away though. Something about Dave had been deeply wrong, weird and off-putting. He looked so different while looking the same. Without seeing Dave again, though, he couldn't put his finger on why, and he became convinced that these people were keeping Dave from him.

There was a long “conversation” following this accusation, in which the brilliant asshat put in charge of monitoring him says, “Well, it's understandable that after three years, there would be some differences…” and then Bro tries to murder the man with the rolling coat rack thing his IV is hooked to, and the security team restrains and sedates him again. The scariest thing is probably that he has absolutely no idea why he decided to react that way. It just seemed like the thing to do.

He thinks he can hear Dave outside the door sometimes, but they don't let him in. Bro wonders what would happen if he screamed loud enough Dave could hear on the other side, but he doesn't know if he actually wants to do that. In the vast, empty cavern that his mind has become, he has no idea what he thinks or feels or wants anymore. Cal isn't there to tell him.

The guy dressed like Batman shows up a couple days later, hands him a stack of papers, and leaves. Bro isn't sure how long he stares at them before realizing he's expected to read them. It's a relief to have direction again, even for something so small. The stack is titled “Debriefing of Calliope of Cherubs, Dave Strider, Dirk Strider, Jade Harley, Jake English, Jane Crocker, John Egbert, Kanaya Maryam, Karkat Vantas, Mark Crocker, Rose Lalonde, Roxy Lalonde, Sollux Captor, Terezi Pyrope, and Vriska Serket regarding circumstances leading up to their planetary immigration and the creation of this universe.” Bro doesn't remember giving anyone a debriefing, but he's not exactly known for having a clear and reliable memory. He also notices that the pages are watermarked with the Justice League logo, so he's not sure how serious he should take this. But he reads anyway, because an implied instruction from a stranger is better than no direction at all.

Turns out the guy dressed like Batman is actually Batman. Go figure.

Now knowing where the fuck he is and what the hell happened with the game, Bro does stop trying to kill his doctors, and eventually they allow supervised visits. That is to say they move him to a room with a window in the wall, which is the absolute only way they'll let people who aren't medical staff talk to him.

Rook is a surprise. Sure, he'd seen him upon "arrival," but he'd been kind of distracted by confusion and panic at the time. He remembers Orange Dave from the game. That had been weird. He's not sure if Ginger Dave is better or worse. No one tells him what he's supposed to think about that, but Rook seems embarrassed about it. He rambles on and on with excuses for his appearance and explanations for his name and permission for Bro to call him Dave anyway.

It takes Bro a while to realize this is supposed to be a conversation. But he doesn't know what he's expected to say, so he doesn't say anything.

Eventually, Rook leaves, but he's back the next day, shoulders set in determination. Unfortunately, that will quickly dissolved in the face of Bro yet again having no idea what's going on or what he's supposed to do about it.
Rook crosses his arms over his chest and looks aside, presumably at something more interesting on his side of the little window. “Dave says you hate us,” his voice crackles, barely audible, through the speakers.

Someone not visible to Bro says something to Rook, who snaps at them, turned away from the microphone so all Bro hears is distorted speech sounds. Rook turns back to him and demands, “Is that true? Do you hate us?”

Bro raises an eyebrow at him. “Do you want me to?” he asks.

“What? No!” Rook objects. Then, to someone else, “Hey, piss off, this is my visit.” When he returns his attention to Bro, though, his shoulders slacken again. His face is unreadable. “Rose says you're crazy, and the Martian says you miss Li’l Cal, and Dirk won't even talk about you, and Jake and Jane are worried you didn't come through right, and Hal's like ’there are no iterations of Dirk which are not a pain in the ass’, and you just sit there and say nothing.”

Bro doesn't know what he's supposed to say to that, so he says nothing.

“SAY SOMETHING!” Rook explode.

“What do you want me to say?” asks Bro.

“Anything,” Rook pleads. “Something that’s true.”

Bro shrugs and says honestly, “I have no idea what to tell you, who to be, without Cal.”

Rook sags a bit. “You do miss him…”

“Nah,” says Bro. For a split second he surprises himself with his response, but then realizes that it's true. “Cal was an asshole,” he says and that's true, too. He remembers the endless laughter because he wouldn't - couldn't - kill Dave. “I just… It's going to take getting used to,” he says. He's only repeating what the doctors said, but they probably know better than he does.

Rook nods, accepting this answer. “Okay,” he says.

Rook visits every day. Dave never does. Slowly, Bro begins to figure out how conversations are supposed to work and what he's expected to feel in response to things. After ten days, a short troll with conical horns and a mouth like a bear trap comes in (into the room. Chick fears nothing) to talk about his legal options for life outside the hospital. Somehow, that honestly had not occurred to him as an eventuality. She talks to him about finances, about apartments they can help him afford - until he's on his feet - in Dallas.

He tells her that he's from Houston, and she smoothly brags about how similar they are so that it shouldn't be a shock to his senses and that her research skills are impeccable. The implication is blunt enough that even he can understand it: He isn't allowed near Dave. He kind of wonders why they let him talk to Rook in that case, but he doesn't argue it. It comes as a surprise then, when Rook visits later babbling about Dallas. Rook expects to move back in with Bro. Of course he does. He's 13. He needs a guardian.

On the last day, the day before his scheduled release, Bro asks to talk to the “weird Robin Hood asshole that's always hovering around my little bro.” Several hours later, Green Arrow shows up. He, too, has no qualms about entering the room directly despite the fact that he is obviously the one insisting Rook’s visitations take place via the window. “What?” he demands, slamming the door behind him. Or attempting to, anyway. Hospital doors are usually built to impede such things.
“You know I can't take him, right?” Bro says, toneless and unreadable by default rather than choice. He should be very, very grateful that Green Arrow’s glares cannot kill. “Like it or not, your his-”

“Hey, shut the fuck up a second,” Bro drawls, and he doesn't actually wait for Green Arrow to respond before continuing. “You ain't gotta fuckin' clue how hard it's been, keeping that kid alive f'r twelve years. Y'all gotta small clue in that file 'v yers, but y' don' know. An' I'm not talkin’ 'bout how hard it is t’ raise kids these days. I'm talking about spendin’ every fuckin’ goddamn day resistin’ the urge t’ take his tongue out so he cain’t snark no more, t’ flay his skin t’ see what kinda screams he'll give, t’ tell 'im we're goin’ t’ fuckin' Disneyland jus’ t’ dump him out in the desert an' see if anyone notices.”

It brings an old, familiar satisfaction to watch horror and repulsion spread across Green Arrow’s face, building with every word. Bro drives his point home, “Y'all keep on askin’ me, beggin’ me, to think somethin’ f'r myself, to actually want somethin’. The only thing I've ever wanted, that I ever had the space 'v mind t’ find a want for in a head fulla someone else's voice, is f'r that boy t’ survive knowin’ me.

“You already got Dave held off, an’ I know you give a shit 'bout Rook 'cuz y’r with 'im ev’ry damn day, guardin’ 'im an’ calmin’ 'im down when I fuck up. So I'm beggin’ y’. Don't you let them send that boy home with me.”

Rook doesn't take the news well when he's told. He nods once, asks if that's all Bro wanted to tell him, and then leaves. Green Arrow glances at Bro one last time before following Rook out.

Despite the “concerning” things he said to Green Arrow, the doctors decide to release him after all, though he's well aware of the various monitors installed in his new apartment. He also can't help but notice that there are two rooms, like Pyrope honestly though his kids would want to visit, much less stay. He starts up the smuppet site again because it's really the only thing he knows to do with himself, but he doesn't actually have the motivation to start from the ground up again, so it sits mostly empty and unattended for weeks. He spends most of his day sleeping and wishing the sleep were permanent.

Surprise has become an interesting novelty once more by the time it strikes him again, and he spends several minutes in bed trying to figure out what that feeling is. It's surprise. Surprise to be woken up by the sound of someone entering his apartment with keys. A normal person would go see what the fuck is up with that, and normally, before all of this, Bro would have jumped at the opportunity to defend his territory. But he doesn't actually care anymore. So he goes back to sleep again.

He's woken up moments later when someone large and insectile grabs him by the throat and yanks him out of bed. Mind reeling to catch up with recent events, he can only grasp desperately at the shiny black arm to keep it from strangling him as it pulls him out into the hall, into the bathroom, then throws him into the shower and turns the shower on. “AAAGH!”

“Thanks, D,” says a familiar voice as the giant insect retreats and someone else sits on the toilet while Bro desperately tries to block water from his eyes and get his bearings. “I know that stench was probably heinous up close, but you're hella stronger than me.”

“Thanks, D,” says a familiar voice as the giant insect retreats and someone else sits on the toilet while Bro desperately tries to block water from his eyes and get his bearings. “I know that stench was probably heinous up close, but you're hella stronger than me.”

Bro coughs out water and turns his back to the majority of the spray to glare at the asshole on his toilet. “Who the fu - ?” But then his eyes answer the question for him. Sitting on his toilet is a 30-something Dave Strider, still with those Ben Stiller shades, dressed in a form-fitting and expensive-looking suit and honest to god holding a latte in one hand and his iPhone in the other.

He tucks away the iPhone and smirks down at Bro. “Hey, honey,” he greets in an exaggeratedly
syrupy voice. “We need to talk about the kids.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

PP: Why the fuck is my apartment full of degenerate guardians?
GC: IT WILL S33M 4N 4PR0PR14T3 M4TCH.
I will explain with puppets.

Chapter Notes

So this is the last chapter update for a while. Not the last ever; I already have some in the works, but they have holes in them and such that need fixing, and I need to take the time to nail down the last bit of plot. Yes, last bit of plot. I am, in fact, working on bringing this massive fic to a close.

This one is short, so I decided to just go ahead and put it up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-- pyreticPuppeteer [PP] began pestering gallowsCallibrator [GC] --

PP: Why the fuck is my apartment full of degenerate guardians?
GC: IT WILL S33M APROPR14T3 M4TCH.
GC: YOUR D1SS4T1SF4CT1ON H4S B33T. UNFORTUN4T3LY, 4S TH3 R33LLOW R33L3NTS 1S NOT 4CTU4LLY “YOURS,” YOUR OP1N1ON OF YOUR F3LLOW R33L3NTS 1S NOT 4CTU4LLY R3L3V4NT!
GC: CORR3CT1ON: YOU FR33LO4D TH3R3. YOU H4V3 Y3T TO P4Y 4 S1NGL3 HUM4N C43G3R TOW4RD TH3 B1LLS 1NCURR3D BY YOUR UPK33P.
PP: Look, I'm working on it okay?
GC: L13S! YOU PUT UP YOUR W3BS1T3 W33KS 4GO 4ND H4V3 DON3 NO FURTH3R WORK S1NC3
PP: Legally, you are too young to be on that website.
GC: L3G4LLY, YOUR W3BS1T3 DO3S NOT 4CTU4LLY CONST1TUT3 “PORNOGR4PHY”
PP: What are you talking about? It's pretty clearly intended for sexual purposes.
GC: MR. STR1D3R, H4V3 Y3T H4D 4 L4WY3R B3FOR3?
PP: Technically, I still don't.
GC: YOU DO 1F YOU W4NT CONTROL OF YOUR L1F3 4G41N OR SHOULD 1 S4Y… FOR ONC3? >:D
PP: Ouch. Okay, lay it on me. How'd I fuck up this time?
GC: TH3R3 4R3 NO HUM4NS ON YOUR W3BS1T3, MUCH L3SS 4CTU4L HUM4N G33L4ND3LS, M3R3LY PLUSH DOLLS W1TH 4 CRUD3 R33BL4NCS TO SUCH. TH3S3 DOLLS 4R3 M4R3K3T3D 4S S3XU4L 41DS
PP: Yeah, I'm pretty sure everyone and their fake-blind grandma can see what these things crudely resemble.
GC: Y3S, 4ND YOU DO N33D TO ST4Y C443FULLY OUT OF TH3 W4Y OF V4GU3 “1ND3C3NCY” L4WS, BUT YOU DON’T N33D TO B3 N33RLY 4S C443FUL 4S OTH3R M3R34NTS OF S4L4C1OUS M4T3R14LS
PP: Huh. Interesting. What favor do you expect in return for your legal advice?
GC: HOW P3R3C3PT1V3 OF YOU! TH1S IS WH4T 1 L1K3 4BOUT D1RKS >:D
GC: F1RST F4V0R IS S1MPL3: T3LL NO ON3 OF YOUR N3W H1V3M4T3S
PP: They haven't actually arrived yet, have they?
GC: H33H33! WH4T T1PP3D YOU OFF?
PP: Two time players and you answering my first question in the future tense.
GC: H33H33H33 YOUR3 D3F1N4T3 3XCH4NG3 FOR CONT1NU3D L3G4L ADV1C3, YOU W1LL OBL1G3 TH3 R3QU3ST TO “GET YOUR FUCKING LIFE TOGETHER YOU USELESS EXCUSE FOR A PROLAPSED ASSHOLE”
PP: And who is this colorful request from?
GC: IT OR1G1N4T3D FROM TH3 M4T3SPR1T OF YOUR UNW1NG3D D3SC3ND4NT
PP: Hold on, let me check the doc to figure out what the fuck that gibberish is referring to…
GC: Y3S TH4T ON3
PP: But why would
PP: Goddammit, GC, you creepy little land shark, someone needs to explain to them what incest is, and it's not going to be me.
PP: Please don't make it be me.
PP: I will explain with puppets. You just wait and see if I don't.

---
-- gallowsCalibrator [GC] has ceased trolling pyreticPuppeteer [PP] --

PP: But why would
AG: Hey stfu with the pings already. She left her computer. Whining after some8ody leaves is completely pathetic.
PP: I made my peace with pathetic like 20 years ago. Who are you? Her secret lover?
AG: Our moirallegiance isn't a secret
PP: Hold on, I need to check my Bullshit-to-English dictionary.
PP: Okay, the boring quadrant. Gotcha.
AG: Like you can even judge what 8oring is as pathetic as you've 8ehaved since getting here
AG: I expected you to 8e more like the real Dirk and am sorely disappointed
PP: They probably have a cream for that, but 1) I am the real Dirk. 2) Alt-Kid-Me actually has his life together?
AG: Of course not, 8ut at least he has the decency to keep going anyway and to defin8ly not drag anyone else down.
PP: Definbly?
AG: definEIGHTly!!!!!!!!!
PP: That is definbly not how that is spelled.
PP: Look, I'm not bringing anyone down but myself. So I haven't got the job thing going as fast as I could. So I sleep a lot. What does it even matter?
AG: 8ecause Striders are the 8est fighters on our team, and we need to have the 8est team possible if we want to take down HIC!!!!!!!!! Not only are you w8sting the valua8le resource of your fighting skills 8y lying around all day, 8ut you're w8sting Dave's 8y making him work harder, so he can't focus on getting over this stupid weakness of his!!!!!!!!
PP: Whoa whoa hold up
PP: How the hell am I making Dave work, and what weakness of his?
AG: Do you not know how your own hive assignment system works? You have to pay for hives dum8ass
PP: Yeah, so wh
PP: fuck
PP: what no i
PP: fucking
AG: ????????
PP: Are you telling me that DAVE has been paying my goddamn bills?
AG: Yes? O8viously?
PP: Obviously.
PP: Fucking jesus christ on a pogo stick
PP: What weakness were you talking about? Me or something else?
AG: UUUUUUUUGH this stupid aversion to violence that he has!!!!!!!
PP: What? What are you talking about?
AG: Consider yourself lucky! You had him 8efore the mental 8reak, when he was actually a decent fighter and proud of it!
PP: The what???
AG: Then he gets on the meteor, has some kind of crisis Karkat has to handle, and next thing I know, our 8est fighter aside from myself and Terezi suddenly decides he doesn't want to see 8lood or do violence anymore. At least he finally came through in the final showdown, 8ut then he changed his mind right 8ack the second we got here.
PP: oh god

-- pyreticPuppeteer [PP] has logged off! --

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:
- The Arrow Cave (yep, that is a thing that canonically existed for a while)
- More Batwoman
- More Flash Family
- Temporal Shenanigans
- Introducing: Hawkins Family & friends
- Introducing: Reyes Family & friends
- More Outlaws & their "family" & "friends"
- More Rook shenanigans
- Ending Tarantula's arc
- More ancestors & dancestors
- Somebody gets pregnant at the worst fucking time
- A LOT of mind control
- Major Character Death
Chapter Notes

That didn't take as long as I thought it would. Also yay bouts of hyperfocus?

Anyway, welcome to the last act...

One month later…

“So…” Oliver Queen says with an impish grin as he leans in toward Dinah Lance with his hand charmingly propped on the wall next to her. “Mission's over. Kids are still in bed…”

“They could be out of bed at any moment,” Dinah reminds him. “And my undetectable rogue with a habit of sneaking out is currently home alone unmonitored.”

“What, you didn't sneak out at sixteen?” Ollie teases. “What's the worse that could happen?”

“Seventeen,” Dinah corrects. “And I was too exhausted from training every day to sneak out. And the mundane worse that could happen is a repeat of Roy, while the absolute worst that could happen, off the top of my head, is that sexy times with her girlfriends causes the green one to turn into a ginormous world-destroying snake.”

Ollie sighs wearily and finally stands up straight again, removing his hand from the wall. “So we never get alone time again?” he all but whimpers.

Dinah rolls her eyes. “Come on, it's not that different from when Roy was living with you,” she says. “Being a parent means making compromises and that taking time for yourself involves more advanced planning.”

Ollie groans and runs a hand through his hair. “But I didn't want to be a parent again,” he whines. “You shouldn't have let my hawk-spite escalate this far.”

Dinah rolls her eyes. “You're a grown man, Ollie, don't blame your decisions on me,” she says. “Besides, I would have forbade it if this actually had anything to do with your 'hawk-spite’.” She gives him that amused smile that tells him she's got his number down to the millimeter. “You were genuinely worried for what would happen if that kid was raised by-”

“SCREEEEE” WHUMP

Dinah and Ollie both jump at the sound. “The fuck was that?” she demands, staring in confusion at the ceiling above her head - the general direction of the noise.

“PTSD dreams probably,” Ollie says with a weary sigh, already heading for the stairs.

Dinah follows after him, worried. “That noise wasn't human, Ollie.”

“Neither is Rook,” he reminds her.
“QUEEN!” a boy’s voice screams from upstairs. It's followed by the sound of running.

“See what I - OOF!” Dinah ducks aside just in time to avoid Ollie tumbling into her as the panicked bird-boy accidentally tackles him.

“What did I tell you about taking the stairs at superspeed?” Ollie demands as he disentangles himself from Rook.

“Queen, I - ”

“I said nothing, because since when could you do that?” Ollie continues, standing up. He holds out a hand to Rook to help him off the floor. “I should also think it obvious that you - ”

Rook slaps his hand away angrily. “Will you shut up?!” he demands.

“Roo - !”

“WE CAN’T BEAT THEM!”

Ollie stands there, awkward and confused, while Rook squats on the floor with his fluffed-up wings arched around him, resembling what Ollie thinks an angry chicken might look like. Ollie turns helplessly to Dinah, but she just shrugs, also confused but at least more intrigued than awkward.

“Beat who?” Ollie finally asks.

“Beat…” Rook’s vibrating tension finally eases slightly. He rubs at his temple with the heel of his palm, which is the softest area of his talon-like hands. “I don’t know. It's blurry. I panicked. I was falling and I can't fly. And you tried to grab me but they shot - ”

“Rook, honey, that hasn't happened,” Dinah assures him. “You were having a bad dream.”

“No, I…” But Rook looks around and seems to only then realize that he's in the Queen Manor, where he’s been staying since shortly after Bro refused custody, instead of wherever he’d dreamed himself to be. He finally stands up, rubbing at the back of his neck. “But I could swear…” He tilts his head sideways at Dinah. “Why are you here?”

Before Dinah can answer, Ollie says, “Alright, you're fine. It's one in the morning, and your tutor comes in the morning.”

“But my tutor already came today?” Rook says, confused.

Ollie rolls his eyes. “No, he comes once a week on Mondays, remember?”

“Yeah, and today was Monday.”

“No, it was Sunday.”

“No, it was Monday.”

“Rook, go to bed.”

Rook grumbles, glaring at Ollie for getting the days wrong, and then heads toward the stairs. He's still rubbing at his neck and pauses a couple treads up to turn back and hesitantly ask, “Uh, actually, can I have some aspirin first?”

If this had been Roy at 13, Ollie would have been certain he was just delaying the process of going to bed. But the sheepish look on Rook’s face says he thinks that's what Ollie will assume when it's
not actually the case. Ollie sighs. “Yeah, okay,” he says, heading toward the kitchen. “For your neck?”

“Yeah,” says Rook, following after him. Dinah trails after them because it would be weird to continue standing in the hall alone and it would also be weird to just leave without saying anything.

“Did you fall on it?” asks Ollie. In the kitchen, he opens the tall cupboard at the far end where he keeps a miniature hospital. Such is the life of heroes.

“I guess. I dunno,” Rook mumbles in that all-too-familiar disgruntled teenager tone.

Ollie hands over the Tylenol, and Rook goes to fetch a glass of water. “I'm starting to think we need to put rails on your bed.”

Without even thinking about it, Rook replies, “Kinky.”

“ROOK!”

“Sorry! Sorry, it just came out!” Rook says, lifting his hands in a show of innocence.

“That's what he said,” says Dinah.

“DINAH!” Ollie objects while Rook doubles over laughing. “Did you have to?”

Dinah just shrugs, taking secret delight in Ollie's flustered reaction. When she glances to Rook again… “Hey, keep your head ducked a moment,” she tells him, stepping toward him.

“Uh, what?” Rook says, of course reacting to her outstretched hand by standing straight and stepping out of reach.

Dinah rolls her eyes. “Don't be childish. I just want to check your neck.”

“I am a child,” Rook reminds her. But he quickly downs his Tylenol, then steps back into her reach and bends his head forward with a huff.

Dinah runs a hard thumb slowly up the line of his spine while Rook squirms until he finally squawks and ducks out of her reach again. “What the hell?” he demands angrily, rubbing at the sore spot again. “I just took that pill, and you wanna make it worse?”

Ollie cocks an eyebrow at Dinah. “Is it bad?” he asks.

“He's definitely knocked a vertebra out of alignment, but I don't have the medical training to know any better than that,” she tells Ollie.

Ollie glances to Rook, who is blushing deeply at having direct attention on him and is probably currently regretting that he left his iShades upstairs. Ollie considers this new information, then nods. “Alright,” he tells Rook. “I'll work from home tomorrow while you have class and try to get you appointments for X-rays and a chiropractor. Since the wings aren't damaged, it should be fine right?”

Dinah scowls. “Maybe wait until the X-rays are done before picking other specialists.”

Both Ollie and Rook turn to her with confusion. “Hm?” says Ollie. “Why?”

“Well, according to League records, he weighs 97 lbs.”

“So?” says Ollie. “That's normal for a kid his size.”
“A kid his size who doesn't have one and a half massive wings.”

Ollie turns to consider Rook again. “What?” Rook demands. His wing flicks irritably. “So maybe I'm slightly underweight? They're not that heavy.”

“That's… possible,” agrees Ollie. “Or… you might have bird bones.”


Ollie shrugs. “We'll find out soon enough. For now, you've had your medicine, so go to bed.”

Rook shoots Ollie a dirty look but obeys. Probably because he's too tired to argue further. Once he's out of sight, Dinah smirks at Ollie triumphantly. “You are such a dad.”

Damian stops in the doorway of the dining room, briefly surprised and then simply glaring. “What is she doing here again?” he demands. “She doesn't live here.”

Koriand’r glances up from her breakfast of sea urchins from where she sits next to Bruce at the dining room table, the two previously engaged in polite conversation while a half-awake Dick shoved eggs in his face. (Cassandra, the only other person already at the table, sits at the other side, exactly half way down; where she always sits.) Koriand’r looks somewhat amused. “Do I not?” she teases the youngest Wayne. She turns to Bruce with a grin. “I'm sorry. I should have asked before filing the change of address form.”

Bruce shrugs. “It’s fine by me,” he says with complete seriousness. “We have plenty of rooms.”

“You needn’t perform additional adoptions, Father,” Damian says, taking a seat at the table anyway. “You have a true heir now.”

“I am an adult,” Koriand’r points out.

“Oh, that wouldn’t stop him from adopting you,” Alfred informs her as he comes out of the kitchen with Cassandra’s second or third bowl of Lucky Charms and a full breakfast platter for Damian. No one packs food away like bats and birds.

“If I thought you needed adopting, no, it really wouldn’t,” Bruce agrees, and Damian makes a face.

“Don’t make this weird,” Dick grumbles into his food.

“If everyone has what they need for the moment, I shall go remind Master Dirk of the time,” Alfred informs them as he adds a glass of orange juice to Damian’s spread and then refills the coffee mugs of Bruce and Dick. There’s a slew of mumbling in response, the consensus of which seems to be that everyone is well-supplied for the moment.

Cassandra tilts her head at the adults of the table curiously. “I… thought, um, when two join… family does adopt each other?”

Dick chokes on his eggs then barks out, “You mean marriage?!” Koriand’r laughs raucously in a manner quite similar to a noise a moose might make. Damian is deeply unimpressed.

Bruce glances to Dick and asks, “Is it bad that the thought of you two trying to marry again worries me more than the fact that she’s been staying over?”

“Well, Trigon did get involved last time…” Koriand’r muses. “I think the concern is justified.”
“Friends can stay over,” Dick points out sullenly. “Which Damian would know if he had any.”

“I’m twelve,” Damian informs him loftily. “That suggestion is inappropriate.”

This time it’s Bruce who chokes on his coffee while Koriand’r ugly-laughs again, Dick rolls his eyes, and Cassandra looks confused. It’s at this moment that Dirk suddenly appears in a chair near Cassandra, one chair between them to keep from crowding her. Since his arrival, it had become increasingly clear that she is his favorite resident of the manor. Cassandra smiles a pleasant greeting at him, which he returns with a blank-faced nod before asking the table, “What’s inappropriate?”

“Of course, that’s where you come in,” Dick grumbles.

“No superspeed in the house,” Bruce chides him. “You’ll ruin the floors.”

“I kept it just under the minimum definition of superspeed as defined by the Justice League,” Dirk informs him. “I also only used it on the ugly rugs.”

Bruce scowls. “I don’t have ugly rugs.”

“Yes, you do,” says everyone else at the table.

“Okay, you know what? Discowing McMullethead doesn’t get an opinion on what is and isn’t ugly,” Bruce says, pointing at Dick just in case there was any doubt as to who he meant.

“It was a phase!” Dick objects.

“What are we talking ab - ?” Dirk starts, but his pointy sunglasses flash with light meaning that Hal has brought up images for him, and he almost makes a facial expression. “Okay, I gotta agree with the big guy on this one.”

“It was the height of fashion at the time.”

“It was ten years out of date when it was new.”

Alfred finally catches up to Dirk at this point and is about to ask what he wants to eat. (Despite how long Dirk has been staying at the manor, Alfred still dares to hope for a different answer than fish, Doritos, and orange soda.) Unfortunately, just as he opens his mouth, Dirk disappears in a flash of green light.

“Urm…” says Alfred instead.

Koriand’r pulls out her phone and brings up pesterchum. “I’ll ask Jade what’s going on, but I think it’s a fair guess that Dirk’s skipping breakfast,” she tells him.

“Less chat, more eating,” says Bruce. “It’s possible we’re going to have to follow.”

Koriand’r obediently digs a chunk of soft yellow mush out of her sea urchin and shoves it in her face, but she soon informs him, “Apparently, Aradia needs him for something having to do with Booster that Jade doesn’t have details on.”

Dick sighs into coffee. “This had better not be stupid.”

“It’s Booster Gold,” says Damian. “How could it be anything else?”

“Eat your breakfast,” Bruce tells them.
Booster Gold is woken up when he accidentally rolls onto the floor. Someone nearby swears while at least one other laughs, which means he’s not at home. As rough hands tipped in sharp claws carefully ease him up, he blinks open his eyes, trying to get his bearings. “Easy, easy,” says Aradia’s smooth, trilling voice. Huh, he’s at her apartment. Apparently, he’d been left on the (now blood-stained) futon couch.

First thing he does is glance around for Dave to see how much trouble he’s in. Dave is half-asleep at the kitchen table, looking like he’s considering drowning himself in his soup mug full of coffee. Surprisingly, Dirk and Sollux are arguing quietly at the table over some object that Booster cannot see clearly from his location on the floor. He tries to raise himself up - “Now, Booster, don’t freak out…” - but only his left palm actually hits the floor. He looks down in confusion, and it takes a few minutes of staring - “You okay, man?” - before he realizes why he can’t find his right arm. Well, most of it. The bit above the elbow is still there.

Booster closes his eyes, draws a long breath, then says calmly, “Aradia, what happened?”

“Well, we had to go stop an anti-aircraft missile from intercepting Supergirl’s life support pod shortly after it entered earth’s atmosphere,” Aradia explains.

“I recall that part, yes.” Booster tries to rub away the pounding pain in his skull, but, oops, he has no right hand to do that with. Begrudgingly, he uses his left hand instead.

“And the device Rip gave us to send it off-course broke.”

Booster sighs heavily. “Sounds vaguely familiar and completely believable.” He leans forward and presses his forehead against his knees. He’s not freaking out. He is definitely not freaking out.

“So you tried your blasters, and that didn’t work, just made it unstable, so I tried to unmake it,” Aradia says. “And I might have accidentally exploded it at you. We saved Supergirl, though!”

Booster is not going to throw up. He is not. Throwing up is not a thing that Booster will do here, now, with Aradia worrying over him and him sitting on Dave’s new carpet. “And the result of that was…?” he asks even though he already has an inkling.

“You were knocked unconscious, lost a lot of blood, and your arm stopped working,” she informs him.

Booster looks up from his knees but purposefully does not look at Aradia (he does not want to find out what kind of face she’s making at the moment) and instead looks to the assholes sitting at the kitchen table. “So that’s why you called in the nerd squad?” he asks.

“Really just me,” says Dirk, raising his hand like it’s elementary school. “Bumblebutt here just can’t keep his nose out of other people’s business.”

Dave laughs so hard and so suddenly that coffee comes out of his nose, which sends the previously sullen Sollux into a fit of snickering.

Dirk decides to ignore them. “Also, Hal wants it noted that he’s helping. Point is, I - We are the only members of the ‘Nerd Squad’ aside from Jade with mechanical aptitude. But apparently, she’s busy with like an earthquake or something. She dropped me off and left.”

“Right,” says Booster while he thinks, They are touching my arm. “Okay.” This is not okay at all. With a groan of discomfort and some concerned hovering from Aradia, Booster, pulls himself back up onto the futon. He feels very much like an old man right now. “Tell me when you’re done, I guess.”
“Actually - ”

Well, that phrase makes Booster’s blood run cold. Slowly, he turns to face Dirk again. Dirk is looking down at the tool in his hand, turning it back and forth nervously. “What?”

“Well, we’ve kind of reached a standstill and were waiting for you to wake up.”

“A standstill?” Booster repeats. He is not going to throw up. He is absolutely not going to throw up.

Dirk turns to the prosthetic arm on the table, leaning back to give Booster the better view he didn’t ask for. The arm is missing large chunks of its artificial skin as well as some chunks from interior workings. Booster swallows the bile rising in his throat while Dirk explains, “So based on the unexpectedly genius reformation of human anatomy in mechanical form as opposed to a much simpler structure, as well as the artistic level of realism in the artificial skin, I’m guessing this thing is intended to pass for the real thing, which might also explain why League files are under the impression that you somehow got your real arm back.”

“Yeah, it was made by a genius,” Booster tells him.

Dirk turns back to him, staring. His expression remains blank. Finally, he says, “So not you?”

“Oh my god,” Sollux groans. “And I thought I was tactless.”

Booster frowns but not because of the very true insult. “No, not me,” he says.

“Uh, that’s cool. Then, I guess that person can fix the - ”

“No, he cannot.”

Dirk keeps staring. This time it’s Dave who replies, “Can we ask why or did you lose your already limited vocabulary in the explosion?”

“He’s dead,” says Booster.

“Oh, he cannot.”

“Okay,” Dirk says flatly. He turns back to the arm and scowls.

Booster sighs and tries to rub away his headache. “Look, as long as it passes for a human arm, it doesn’t have to pass for a good human arm,” he tells them.

“Yeah, that’s the issue,” says Dirk. “I can rebuild it no problem. Some of the parts will take a while, but what’s left here is a pretty easy-to-follow roadmap.” He pokes at the arm with his tool, which kind of makes Booster want to hit him. “But I have no idea what this skin is made out of. Nothing like it exists on this earth that Hal’s been able to find, and on my earth nothing like it was developed previous to extinction.”

A bit shakily, Booster raises himself up to stand again and turns toward the hall. “Uh, where y’ goin’?” Dave asks after him, confused.

“I’m attempting to be a nice guest by not throwing up on your new carpet,” Booster informs him.

“Oh. ...Thanks?”

When Booster finishes in the bathroom and opens the door, he stands there leaning against the frame for a moment, listening to the kids bicker quietly in the main room. Somewhere, there is a muted, repetitive screeching noise that’s been driving him crazy for the last several minutes. “Hey, guys, someone needs to turn off their alarm clock,” he calls out.
“Oh right, ten is Karkat’s wakeup time,” says Dave, and then he’s through the hall and through his
door and Booster can hear him mumbling to Karkat, trying to get him out of bed.

Booster gingerly makes his way back to the futon as Sollux is asking, “Did a god of time really just
forget what time it is?”

“No, he knows it’s ten,” says Aradia. “He’s just never the one to get Karkat up. The alarm usually
works. He must’ve had a late - ”

“ARADIA!” Dave shouts, and everyone jumps. Glances are quickly exchanged and then Aradia is
running to Dave and Karkat’s room, and Sollux hovers worriedly halfway to the hallway.

Booster doesn’t go to the futon. Instead, he stays in the hallway, leaning against a closet door and
listening. “No, if it was that, he’d just be tired, not unable to be revived. Not in the first stages. And
he’s too young, besides,” Aradia is telling Dave. “Hold on, let me check him over.”

“I can check his vitals, Aradia!” Dave snaps. “His breathing is ragged, he’s overheated, and oh, I
don’t know if you’ve noticed, but he’s temporally displaced.”

“He’s not displaced. He’s tangled. Honestly,” Aradia assures him, and it bothers Booster that he has
no idea what they’re talking about.

“How do you know things I don't know?”

“Maid,” she reminds him. “Also, he told us. Remember? You and him and Rose and Terezi are
experiencing memories of your alternate selves? Sollux, too, now.”

“That's a time thing? But no one else feels like this.”

“Because no one else has gotten this- Dave!”

“Shit-pissing-fuck!” And then Dave is out of the room in a blur and immediately next to Dirk. “Dirk,
could you and the others bring someone else through like right now?”

“Right now?” Dirk repeats, the thin line of the lips on his otherwise blank face pointing slightly
downward.

“As soon as we can get the four of you in the same room,” Dave clarifies.

Dirk scratches his neck and glances toward the hall, already guessing what Dave wants. “I can't say I
really feel full strength, but I mean, it’s like 95%…”

“So you can do it?”

“I… I don't know,” Dirk admits. “I mean, probably, but if we fuck this up-”

“For no care if we fuck the Sufferer up!” Dave snaps. “He's already lived once! I care about
making sure Karkat isn't damaged irrevocably!” For some reason, he gestures to his wrists as he says
it.

Dirk glances to the hall again, then he stands and nods. Dave immediately has his phone out, and
Dirk begins to instruct, “Okay, tell Jade to take us to Watchtower; it can handle the power
fluctuations. Then get Karkat to Watchtower Medbay, and have Mid-nite prepare for the five of us.
Then tell our mentors and supervisors what's going on and update everyone-” The last sentence is cut
off by Dirk disappearing in a green flash.
Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

Different Shit, Same Day
“What the fuck are you doing to my bed?”

“Language.” Ollie turns off the cordless drill and turns to face Rook, who is standing in the doorway of his bedroom looking confused and disgruntled. “I told you I was going to install siderails on your bed so you'd stop falling out,” he reminds Rook.

“I thought you were joking!” says Rook. “It looks like a huge crib! I am not a baby, Queen!”

“Kinda acting like one,” Ollie grumbles under his breath as he picks up the drill again.

“Excuse me?!”

“How long of break were you given?”

“Tutor’s done for today.”

“What, already? What time is it?”

“Like 10:30, but I've already had all these lessons yesterday.”

“You mean you're actually serious about that deja vu thing?”

“Yeah?”

“Was I doing this ‘yesterday’?”

“Well, no, but I didn't fall out of bed, yesterday.”

“Huh.”

“I think I died.”

After gouging Rook’s bed with a slip of the drill, Ollie quickly sets down the drill again and turns back to him. Rook looks bothered, but he doesn't look physically damaged. Okay, no reason to freak out yet. “Wanna run that past me again?” Ollie asks as patiently as possible.

Rook scowls and looks down at his feet. “I... we... We were out, y'know, doing the hero thing for the first time? And... well, there was a fight. I got myself shot. I woke up here.” He shrugs and looks away toward the door, entire body language screaming sullen guilt.
I got myself shot. Ollie wants to hit himself and then maybe Bro Strider. There is absolutely no recognition in that statement that it is Ollie's job to keep Rook safe. That it is the world's job to keep children safe. That if someone shoots him to death, it's not his own fucking fault.

Ollie kind of wants to hug the kid, but you don't have to be a genius to realize that Rook would hate that for a multitude of reasons. So he makes sure the drill is off, and he forces himself to carefully consider Rook’s claims. “How much of ‘yesterday’ has actually repeated?”

“I didn't dream it, Queen!” Rook snaps angrily.

“I'm not saying-” Ollie cuts himself off with a rare flash of self-awareness. “Okay, I did say that. But now I take it back. If it was a dream it would have worn off by now, and you wouldn't be able to convince your tutor that you're ahead in your lessons. So what I want to know is how changeable this is.”

Rook’s wings fluff up slightly, distrustful, but his body language relaxes a smidge and his facial expressions return to neutral. “[...] I don't know,” he admits. “A lot, I think? If I’d played dumb with… whatever his name is… then it would've been totally the same, I could tell. But he didn't, like, keep going on script no matter what. And, like, I didn't fall out of bed last time, so you didn't decide I needed a crib. You actually went to some Justice League thing.”

“We’ll talk about the cri-the bed later,” says Ollie. “What Justice League thing?”

Rook tilts his head in that curious bird way. “They haven't messaged you?” he asks.

Ollie reaches to his back pocket, but his phone isn't there. “I must've left it in the office,” he says. “Was it important?”

Rook shrugs. “They're going to bring in the Sufferer,” he tells him.

“The w-? You mean troll anarchist hippie Jesus?” asks Ollie. “I though alpha-Rose was next? Wait, has it even been enough time since-” He hesitates at the flinch Rook gives at referring to Bro. “-the last one?”

Rook blows his bangs out of his face and tilts his head again. Haircuts were also a thing he didn't have to deal with as a sprite, probably, but Ollie isn't sure if he should ask or wait to be asked about getting it cut. “Well, it’s close enough, but I think there's like an emergency with Karkat or something? It works out fine; they didn't actually need to call the whole league in.”

“Okay.” Ollie doesn't know when exactly he made up his mind to let Rook take the lead, but apparently he did since he is now standing, crossing his arms patiently, and asking, “So you're the one with the Cliff's Notes for today. What do you want to do about it?”

Rook looks briefly surprised, having not expected to be asked his opinion on what they do. He considers. “[...] I have to figure out how this happened,” he decides. “I need a time player, but Dave and Aradia will be busy. Do you know how to contact Hunter?”

Ollie shakes his head. “He just kind of shows up,” he says. He heads to the door and makes a sweeping motion to imply that Rook should move on down the hallway. “Come on. We'll ask Oracle if she can help track down Damara or Rip.”

He wakes up to the feeling of weird undulating pressure on his wrists. He tries to pull them up, but someone pulls them back. He opens his eyes to see who it is that insists on rubbing at his wrists so thoroughly. “What are you doing?”
“Sorry, man, your body is so convinced that your wrists are wounded that it's got the circulation all fucked up, so I gotta do this to keep everything moving along. Gotta say, when Aradia discovered they’d turned bright red, kind of freaked out a little.”

“Because of the color?”

The hands on his wrists don't still for a second, but the whole rest of the boy flinches. He’s silent for several minutes, never once looking up from his work, and when he eventually speaks it is in a barely audible whisper. “Do you… do you remember who I am?” he asks.

It takes an uncomfortably long amount of time to dig up the answer, but he does dig because the boy is familiar. Intimately familiar, in fact. “Dave,” he says at last, and Dave relaxes just an iota.

“And… and you?”

“Kankri,” he answers too quickly, and the sob that Dave is unable to hold back is absolutely gut-wrenching. “That… that was the wrong answer. I can tell it was the wrong answer. It sounds wrong, I just… I'm confused.”

Dave nods as though accepting the answer, but he isn't looking at him. He's leaning over from where he sits right next to the hospital bed, his forehead pressed against the sheets and his shoulders shaking. Somehow, Dave is still massaging his wrists.

“Why… what happened?” he asks carefully.

Dave takes a moment to steady his breathing. He wipes his face on his sleeve and croaks, “Apparently, the way you and me and Rose and Terezi are remembering shit from past lives is actually fucking with our timelines. Entwining us and our alt-selves. Though… it stopped happening with me, so I’d just assumed… Um, with your aspect in play, it's definitely having a physical effect, which we didn't expect, though I guess that's an eventual possibility for all of us. Raven says it's a god thing. That it's not uncommon for gods to be multiple people while also being the same person. So without going to the effort to define our alts as definitely different people, they end up being realized as part of our selves.”

“Which means my wrists think they're on fire?” says… Karkat. His name is Karkat.

“It's a… symbol… thing,” Dave mumbles. He risks a glance toward Karkat’s face. “Does it hurt?”

Karkat shakes his head. “Ah, no. Actually, um, I don't… I think maybe they're a little numb.”

A wine emerges from the back of Dave’s throat, and he turns to glower at the offending body parts. “Fuckin’ fantastic.”

“My name is Karkat… Vantas,” Karkat says, wanting to reassure him. “I'm an Alternian troll, and I'm the Knight of Blood, though I never godtiered. And I think I'm in love with you.”

The look Dave gives him is so openly raw it makes Karkat want to look away, turn away, but there's also this small smile playing at the edge of Dave's lips that makes Karkat want to stay there watching him forever.

Eventually, Dave looks away again, clears his throat and says, “So, yeah, we're at the Watchtower again. The Void Session players will be pulling out Sufferer soon. They're just being extra anal about set up this time because no one feels fully up on the power meter yet and this wasn’t planned ahead.”

“Makes sense,” Karkat mumbles, already nodding off again.
Dave's fingers tighten painfully hard on Karkat's wrists. “No,” he says sharply, and when Karkat looks up again, Dave's gaze is sharp and determined. “No, Kat, you have to stay awake. You have to… I don't know what's going to happen if you fall asleep again.”

Karkat raises an eyebrow at that. He thinks if he's going to forget that he's Karkat again, he's just as likely to do that awake, but he decides not to say so. Instead, he says, “Then you're going to have to find a way to entertain me, because I am tired and bored.”

Dave's lips quirk again. “Well, okay, but don't forget that you asked for this.”

Karkat rolls his eyes. “Somehow, I think I will never forget.”

“Then prepare yourself, Vantas, for the very best of Old Earth Slam Poetry never before seen in the likes of this universal iteration!” Dave boasts, making grandiose gestures along with his words despite the fact that he's still holding Karkat’s wrists.

Karkat snickers.

In the dueling room, Dirk, Jane, Jake, and Roxy sit exactly as they did during Bro’s summoning, passing energy between each other at higher and higher rates of speed. Again, Green Lanterns line the room just in case something horrible breaks through or the kids need immediate aid. Everyone else, however, has to watch through the camera feed into the observation room next door.

“So,” Superman says, leaning forward on the desk Batman is standing next to, watching the same screen, “there was something I needed to tell you this morning, but then this happened, and now I feel like the polite thing to do is wait, but also it feels weird just holding onto information until a more polite time.”

The energy passed between the four teenaged gods just barely starts to hint at a skeletal system, but the process seems to be taking them more time and effort than it did with Bro. “I'm not a polite person,” Batman answers. “Go ahead and tell me.”

Superman instead holds out a tablet to him, but teases, “Oh, don't be so hard on yourself. I think you're charming.”

Batman rolls his eyes and takes the tablet. Some of the other leaguers have overheard or at least noticed that a conversation is taking place, but if this was a private issue, Superman would have asked to speak privately. Or just sat on whatever this is until later.

Whatever this is turns out to be an article for the Daily Planet’s pop culture blog, written by Rose Levin. “The Renaissance of Dada,” Batman reads out loud. He glances back toward Superman. “Those are two completely different cultural movements,” he says.

Superman rolls his eyes. “Just keep reading.”

Batman sighs and scans over the page. It's about a new indie art film that's been touring various theaters which takes the idea of “found art” to a new modern level, constructing the film’s scenes entirely out of other films with dubbed-in lines that don't remotely match the scenes, the sound files apparently poorly recorded from across eighty years of rap and spoken word performances, and which features a score composed entirety of abstract noises. It is apparently impossible to enjoy aesthetically, and yet, if you can actually sit through the whole thing (as one might if they are literally being paid to be there, such as Ms. Levine was) the story itself unfolds to reveal a heartfelt journey into the loneliness of feeling displaced in your world, completely disconnected from supposed family and completely cut-off from would-be friends all laid over repeated artistic themes of life and death,
void and creation, futility and purpose.

The film is titled “Year 1” and has no credits other than a simple “by RiLal”.

Batman looks to Superman again. “RiLal,” he repeats.

“Yep.”

“That’s one letter off from Roxy’s hacking handle.”

“Y’know, I thought it sounded familiar?” Superman says with an eye roll.

Batman sighs heavily and looks to the monitor again. They're up to the neural system. “So, at some point, they bring through ‘Alpha-Dave,’ who then chooses a legal name based on his ectobiological mother, and at some point after that, he produces an autobiographical art film, then he goes back in time to well before he started existing in this universe to secretly release it.”

“Wait, are you being serious or making things up?” Superman asks, confused. “How can you possibly know all that?”

Batman frowns at him and says, “I'm always serious.”

“No, you're not.”

“And I can think of no other dadaist filmmakers motivated to use a pseudonym that references Roxy specifically. Can you?”

“Well, no, I kind of suspected that, but…”

“Once you have that, then you must realize the reason he's already here is that he must share a degree of Dave's temporal abilities. After that the rest just falls into place.”

“... Obviously,” Superman says in a voice that clearly states he doesn't consider this obvious at all.

Batman glowers at the screen. “The real question is why?”

Superman shrugs. “Maybe he's just trying to pass the time,” he suggests.

Batman gives him a Look. “He's apparently a time player, Superman.”

“So he's not immediately needed anywhere,” Superman points out. He gestures vaguely to the screen. “After everything they've been through, everything they're still going through, I bet boredom is a luxury he hasn't felt in a while.”

“Maybe,” says Batman. “Or maybe he's fucking with us.”

Superman sighs heavily and rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “Sure, if you want to assume the worst.”

When Booster wakes up again, there is a large black bug staring back at him with blank white eyes. Urg. He really does not understand these children’s love of The Mayor. There's nothing wrong with him, per se, he's just impossible to read. Though saying as much to Aradia only confused her, so apparently the kids have no difficulty reading him.

He turns away, trying to push himself upright, but not only is that surprisingly difficult, he feels the fabric of the futon in a part of his arm that doesn't normally get feedback. He grits his teeth. Right.
The arm Ted had made for him was damaged in the attempt to ensure Supergirl's landing. The kids never did mention the leg, so he supposes that must be fine. His arm had been removed by Aradia to be repaired by Dirk and Hal, but Dirk had been rushed out to bring Sufferer back, Dave leaving right after with Karkat.

Aradia and Sollux had stayed, and Booster had decided to get some rest. Now, he can hear them whispering quietly to each other. With a sigh, Booster grabs the back of the futon with his left hand and hauls himself up. “Mornin’,” he slurs sleepily.

“You've only been out an hour and thirty-seven minutes and sixteen seconds,” Aradia tells him. “The Mayor got you some human nutrition canisters that Jane recommended.” Then to Sollux she says, “So it's worse than usual?”

“Yeah, if I don't get these assholes to stop skipping around the unniverse, smmashing fates togetherr like a wrrigglerr givenn a set of impressionn dolls forr 12th Perrigree, I'mm goingk to fuckinn explode,” he grumbles.

Booster sits up properly and lets The Mayor hand him what turns out to be a protein shake. He briefly wonders why he isn't allowed real food, but quickly realizes what Crocker must have realized: You really, really don't want trolls any more involved in human food than simply purchasing a pre-made product. “Uh, thanks,” he says, and The Mayor nods firmly before scuttling off out of sight somewhere.

“I still haven't met them, so I don't know if I can help, but I’ll see if Rip can help me track them,” Aradia is telling Sollux, which gets Booster's attention immediately.

“What are we involving Rip in?” he asks warily. He starts pulling himself to his feet, which turns out to be more effort than he expected, so he has to set down the drink first.

“The other time players are doing something that gets Sollux’s head messed up,” Aradia tells him. “Too many imminently deceased who also aren't deceasing.”

“...Right,” says Booster, who understood none of that. He makes his way carefully over to the table for no other reason than that it is a thing he can do. His muscles are stiff and weary. His prosthetic arm is still sitting in the middle of the table. “So how is the Karkat thing coming?”

Sollux glances briefly at his husktop, which sits on the table next to him but isn't currently being used. “They brought Suffererrr inn, but nno nnews aside fromm that,” he lisps. Actually, more of a slow drawl than a lisp today. “Guess we'll hearr morre whenn morre happenns.”

It's then, as Booster eases his ass carefully into a chair at the table, that he realizes there is a half-eaten bag of gummy bears next to the husktop. “Are you drunk?” he demands.

“Human migraine medicines don't work,” Aradia informs him. She is busily scrawling something that looks like chemistry notes on a stack of printer paper. “It's the best we can do right now, though Rose said that she was told in the dream bubbles that catnip might help? I don't know what that is.”

“...Right,” Booster says again. He decides that it's not his job right now to keep Sollux in line, so he lets it go. It's not like he's any better with troll physiology than they are with human. “Where is Skeets? And what are you doing?”

“He's at Vanishing Point, going ahead and getting his history updated while you recover, and I'm trying to get a clear version of the formula for your arm's artificial skin so maybe Rose can alchemize it,” she tells him. “It's a multistep process, and I don't actually understand what I'm writing down.”
Booster blinks at her, confused. “I don’t… Then how are you… But Dirk said…”

“Well, you said the only guy who knew how it was made was dead, so I figured I’d just ask him,” she says. Casually. Like it's nothing. “He wasn't hard to reach, actually.”

Booster stares at her. “Ted.”

“Yeah,” she says.

“You asked Ted Kord about the formula for the prosthetic skin of my prosthetic arm?”

“Am asking,” she corrects, and Booster can’t help looking around the room like the zombie of his best friend is going to jump out at him again.

He rubs his eyes. Tries to process the information. But, no, he's still stuck. “Ted Kord, who is dead?” he asks.

Aradia finally puts down her pen and turns to him. “Yes, Booster, your dead friend Ted Kord. I did tell you that I can channel, didn’t I?” she asks.

“Yes, but…” Booster finds himself looking around again. He doesn't know what he expects to see.

“Why are you upset with me?” Aradia asks with something of a pout.

“I'm not upset with you.”

“You seem upset with me.”

“I'm not-!” Booster cuts himself off before he can start a really stupid fight. “Look, I just…” He just what? What is he trying to say? What does he even think? “I… I need to go home,” he decides, pushing to his feet again.


“I'll heal,” he snaps. He grab the doorknob with his left hand and shoves his weight into the door to force it open, knowing from experience that it sticks terribly. “Good night, Aradia.”

“But it's-” Aradia is cut off by the door slamming shut.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

“No… tree… tray… traipsing?” Rook says, squinting at the ‘No Trespassing’ sign hung on the chainlink fence that surrounds the Arizona time lab. “Well, I have no idea what this says, so obviously I don't have to obey it.”
When he wakes up, the first thing he sees is white. He hisses in pain at the way the glaring light hits his eyes, but at least it's only artificial. He lifts his hand to shadow his eyes, and then he looks at his hand, squinting to focus under the harsh light.

Frowning, he sits up and has a look around. The room is largely white and light gray. It looks disturbingly lifeless for something painted in lusus colors. He himself seems to be lying on some kind of cushioned relaxation platform. The floor of the room seems to be glossy squares rather reminding him of shell except for the fact that he has never seen shell so flat and perfectly shaped. To each side of him are white hanging fabrics, and in front of him is a white-painted wall. Behind him is another white wall which also features unrecognizable contraptions. The ceiling has more squares, but these are maybe cork or sponge, he can't tell. Some of the squares are doubled into rectangles and emit the bright light of the room. He has never seen a luminescent material so bright, but it's too large and evenly distributed to be a cage of glow grubs, and it is too small to be a caged luminescence beast.

He thinks, briefly, of his mother, but shoves the thought quickly aside. He already knows what's become of her; dwelling on it will not help see him through… whatever this is.

Slowly, carefully, he slides off the platform. He reaches out and carefully pulls one hanging fabric aside. On the other side he sees another cushioned relaxation platform, but this one is empty. Beyond it, the room ends in another wall, which also features odd contraptions made of materials he can't begin to guess at.

Frowning, he walks around the first platform and pulls aside the other sheet. There sits a… some kind of alien. Trollish in construction but lacking horns and with very light pink-brown skin. It is either a very, very large adolescent or, despite its trollish appearance, its species simply does not develop chitinous plating. Its hair, while properly black, looks softer than a troll’s. It wears a skin-tight uniform of garishly bright colors, and it appears to have fallen asleep leaning against a clear glass wall. There's a door in the wall.

Carefully, he tiptoes around the creature toward the door. The door is not clear. He could simply break the glass of the wall, but that would definitely wake the guard if not alert others in this place. If he is lucky, the door will be unlocked.

He is not lucky.

With a sigh, he considers his options. Option 1: Stay here and wait for the guard to wake and the torture to begin. Option 2: Break the wall and get caught by the guard within minutes, but at least he'll have forced the empress to buy a new wall.

He hits the wall.

“OW, FUCK!” he cries without thinking, and he shakes his hand out in an attempt to dispel the pain.

And then he remembers where he is.

He turns to see his guard watching him with a bemused expression. “I, uh, see you're awake,” says the guard. Its eyes are blue, but they're a bright, garish blue. Like a flower maybe. Or a jewel. Strange.
He takes a step back and says nothing.

“Um, so,” the guard says awkwardly. “Do you speak English?”

He shakes his head. “I don't know what that is,” he says.

“... Nevermind,” the guard decides. “Do you know who you are? What's happened?”

He considers but sees no reason to try to hide it now. “My name is Kankri Vantas,” says the Signless. “Though I have been called many other things, my adult title is Signless.”

“Signless?” says the alien.

“Yes,” he says. He watches the alien carefully. “You seem surprised. Did she not tell you who you were guarding?”

“She? Guarding? I-” The alien shakes its head. “Sorry, I just… I thought your name was Sufferer?”

The Signless’s upper lip curls in distaste. “Well, I suppose it must be if she says so, mustn't it?” he says. “I suppose she thinks she's funny?”

“I- Who-”

“Same sense of humor that puts a blue eyed alien in power over a mutant, I'm sure,” he hisses, throwing a baneful glare toward the glass wall she no doubt intends to mock him from behind.

“Now, wait a minute-”

“So what's the plan?” asks Signless. Sufferer. Whatever.

“Plan?” the alien repeats dumbly.

“She must have resurrected me for some purpose,” he says. “What's first? Torture? A more private execution? Perhaps I am to watch my mother's-”

“Hey, just hold on!” cries the alien, and Signless does stop speaking, though he's not sure what he's supposed to be holding on to. “This 'she' that you think brought you back… Do you mean Meenah Peixes?”

Signless eyes the alien warily. Where did she get this thing? “Yes, but if you hope not to find yourself on my end of things, you really shouldn't go throwing around her juvenile name.”

“I don't care,” the alien says. Flippantly. Like the concept of caring about that detail is absurd. “Look, I think there has been a misunderstanding. Peixes didn't bring you here.”

Signless laughs. “That is what you would have me believe?” he demands. “I died!” he objects, holding out his wrists to the alien. “I have the scars as well as the memories to prove it! Her Imperious Condescension is the only one who could possibly have brought me back!”

“Actually, there are a lot of ways to be brought back,” the alien tells him, unimpressed. “Among them is combining the powers of Jake English, Page of Hope; Roxy Lalonde, Rogue of Void; Dirk Strider, Prince of Heart; and Jane Crocker, Maid of Life.”

“I- That's-” Signless steps back again, flabbergasted. He shakes his head. This can't be… “Those are... Those are Sgrub titles. But... those aren't troll names.”
“No,” the alien agrees. “They're human. Post-scratch iterations, like yourself.”

“Post…?” Again Signless shakes his head. He walks toward the other side of the room like the relaxation platforms might provide some protective barrier between him and these words. “But… Sgrub wasn't real. It was just a dream I had.”

“A dream of a better world,” says the alien. “Of the planet Beforus.”

Signless turns back to the alien, unable to believe what he's hearing. “I've never told anyone that name. Not even my mother. How did you hear it?”

The alien smiles gently with blunt teeth. “Damara Megido told me.”

Signless swallows the growing lump in his throat. “Dam… Damara? She…”

“Horns that spiral in a big circle like this? Burgundy blood? Profane and nihilistic sense of humor?” says the alien.

“I could never find her,” says Signless.

“Because she wasn't born yet,” the alien tells him. “Her grub wouldn't arrive on Alternia until after the Vast Glub.”

Signless startles. “The Vast- She killed us? She just- She what? She got tired of the effort of keeping us all subjugated and enslaved and decided an empire of corpses would be more fun?”

The alien shakes his head sadly. “No,” he says. “From what I'm told, it was an accident. The Empress and her Heiress both thought the other would care for Gl'golyb.”

Signless swears under his breath somewhat profusely. The crude words come a lot more easily now, it seems.

“Look, I… I could explain it all to you, but you'd be hearing it fourth hand,” says the alien. “There are a few other trolls here who would very much like to meet you, and you can speak with them about your history. What I'm here to do is to ease you into your new reality.”

“My new reality?” Signless repeats.

The alien nods. “I'm called Superman,” he explains. “I'm a Kryptonian, but my planet is dead. Instead, I protect Earth, the planet we are currently in orbit above. It's inhabited by humans, a species that looks a lot like me and which was created as a result of the game you call Sgrub. You were brought back because your timeline was interfering with that of your descendent, Karkat Vantas. You are now in a quarantine observation cell in the Justice League's Watchtower, the league being the organization of Earth defenders that I work with. You are currently under quarantine until we can verify that it is safe to interact with you. That's why I was chosen to speak with you, as I am not susceptible to most disease and it is very difficult to damage me.”

Signless stares at him. “I'm sorry, did you say ‘descendant’?”


“But that isn't possible,” says Signless. “I'm a mutant; I could never turn in a pail! We always disposed of them. Evaded or destroyed any drones that came looking for us. My material never could've-”
“Yeah, I get the point,” Superman says, his facial skin becoming pinker. “They, uh, the descendant trolls, they weren't produced in the usual way but instead through game mechanics.”

“Ectobiology?” Signless asks, recalling a vague dream on the subject from years ago.

Superman nods. “Hold on a sec, this might help.” He goes to a chair in the corner where a rectangle hide-pouch has been left and fetches out of it a smaller, glossy rectangle. Like a mirror with black backing instead of silver. He turns it on and fiddles with it, images flashing across the screen, some kind of hand-held display. And then he holds it out to Signless. “There you go. You can see him once the quarantine is over. No longer than two days from now, if all goes well.”

Still feeling somewhat trepidatious, Signless is careful in taking the glass thing from him. On it is an image of… himself. As an adolescent. Scowling. He isn't hooded, and he's wearing a sweater with… “This symbol…”

“His sign,” says Superman. “Based on your…” He gestures to Signless’s wrists.

“I… gave him a sign?”

“Your disciple did,” Superman explains. “She worked very hard to make sure that you weren't forgotten. Started a religion in your name with the belief that another mutant would come. To prepare for him, they bred him a lusus. A crab. The only one of its kind.”

“I… I knew there would be another, but I didn't think…” He stares at the picture. “Karkat, you said?”

Superman nods. “Karkat Vantas, Knight of Blood.”

Signless can't help smiling at that. A knight. His descendant is a knight. “I love him,” he says without thinking, but knows immediately that it's true. He smiles gratefully up at Superman and hands back the picture. “Will you tell him? Tell him that I love him, and I am so very glad he's alive.”

Superman’s smile is broad and lusus-white. “If you want,” he says, clapping Signless on the shoulder for some reason. “But you'll be able to tell him yourself soon enough.” He puts away the glass thing in his hide-pouch and turns back to Signless. “Now, if you don't mind, let's get started running those tests so we can get you out of quarantine.”

“No… tree… tray… traipsing?” Rook says, squinting at the ‘No Trespassing’ sign hung on the chainlink fence that surrounds the Arizona time lab. “Well, I have no idea what this says, so obviously I don't have to obey it.”

He grabs hold of the fence to climb, but Ollie immediately pulls him off. “Don't be an idiot. That's razor wire,” he chides, pointing to the top of the fence. “Besides, he's an ally, not an enemy. It would be better if we could get him to invite us in instead of breaking and entering.”

“I like how ‘we should be nice to him’ is your second reason,” Rook teases. “But somehow, I don’t think knocking will work.” He demonstrates knocking on the fence, which only slightly rattles it.

Ollie looks around, scowling. The car sat on the dirt access road only a few yards away, but, despite the presence of an access road, there's no gate here. The fence seems to encircle the entire property, but Ollie can see no gate within view. The lab itself was a couple miles in from the fence. He kneels down to look at the ground by the road, trying to figure out if it's a trick somehow, and, low and behold there are empty postholes next to the posts at each side of the road. There used to be a gate here, but Hunter had removed it.
Ollie swears. “Stay here,” he tells Rook, who rolls his eyes in response and starts rambling on about how enticing it is to run off into the Arizona desert. Ollie walks back around the car, opens the trunk, removes the flooring that hides the spare tire, removes the spare tire, then pulls back the black cloth under which his costume and equipment is hidden. Ideally, he'd approach Hunter as Green Arrow, not Oliver Queen, but he has long learned not to drive long distances in costume if he can avoid it. He would definitely be pulled over and forced to verify his identity. Besides, trying to hide your identity from time travelers is entirely pointless.

He walks back around to where Rook is waiting, still rambling about the imagined beauty of the Arizona desert in such a way that makes it pretty clear he's never been. Whether this is on purpose or not is hard to tell. Ollie ignores him, pulls a flare arrow out of his quiver, and fires it high into the air over their heads, where it quickly explodes into a flash of red light and a smoking trail.

They wait.
And they wait.
And they keep waiting.

“How can I jump the fence?” Rook asks.

“No,” Ollie snaps. Then he sighs. “Look, just let me-” But when he turns back to the car, he jumps in surprise and maybe even yelps a bit. And then his bow is raised in front of him warily. “Damara?” he asks, uncertain.

The adult troll sitting on the hood of Ollie's car looks like Damara and Aradia. She's tall and thin, but has a little more meat on her jutting hip bones than Damara does. The spiral of her horns is thin, long, and slightly drooping like someone had pulled on them while they were developing. Her face is blank, and she watches them owlishly like they're fascinating bugs. She's wearing a bright green cheongsam and her wooly hair has been cut short with two long pieces in front. The height and black chitin armor mark her as an adult.

“Damara?” Ollie says again.

Still the trolls says nothing. Still the troll watches them.

“Dude, I don't think that's Dams,” says Rook.

“Who else would it be?”

“I think you already know the answer to that.”

The troll hops down inelegantly, revealing that the car’s paint has faded, cracked, and peeled where she touched it, making Ollie swear under his breath. “Language,” Rook reminds him, still not daring to take his eyes off the troll.

She steps closer to Rook, and Ollie raises his bow to aim for the eye. He now knows what an actual kill shot on a troll is. “Stay back, and ident-”

The troll vibrates and disappears with an audible static buzz. Just as suddenly, she reappears next to Ollie, grabs his bow, and ages it out of usefulness, the string breaking, the metal oxidizing and warping. Before Ollie has even reacted, the troll disappears again and appears next to Rook. Rook reaches for his blade without thinking, but as it slides into his hand from his strife deck, he realizes the troll isn't attacking him. Instead, she’s holding out three cards.
Rook looks at the cards, then looks at the troll. The troll holds them out further in clear invitation.

Carefully, Rook captchalogues his blade again and takes the cards. They're three new strife decks, each already allocated as “2x1dentkind”. Whatever the hell that means, they each seem to be equipped with a single set of identical wands. Well, nearly identical. Two sets have slightly curved hilts while the remaining set is entirely straight. “Uh, I'm not magic,” he says, confused.

The troll taps one long claw on a card. “Rrrhoz,” she tells him. She taps another. “Damara.” She taps the third one. “Callie.”

And then the troll disappears again. Rook looks around, but there's no sign of her. He turns to Ollie, who is watching him in obvious confusion. Ollie's bow is still broken.

This has been very unhelpful.

“Hrng… who won? Me or the train?” Roxy asks as she slowly blinks awake under the bright hospital lights.

“Definitely the train,” Dirk answers. She turns to look at him and finds that he's laying in the bed next to hers in the medical bay with a pillow held over his face to block the lights from his eyes. Like her, he has an IV in his arm and thus has to keep that arm held carefully straight.

She laughs at him. “See, you shoulda got drunk with me back when I was offering. You'd be able to handle this kind of migraine,” she tells him.

He flips her off with his IV arm.

Suddenly, the curtain on Roxy’s other side is pulled back, and Jane grins at her. “You're finally awake!” she greets. “Thank god, Jake is still out. He's fine, just a heavy sleeper.”

“What about you?” asks Roxy. “You seem awful chipper for the massive migraines me and Dirk are sporting.” Dirk makes a groan of agreement.

“Maid of Life,” Jane reminds her. She scootches Roxy’s legs out of the way and then hops up onto the end of the bed. With a self-satisfied smirk, she leans forward up the bed and greets Roxy with a peck of a kiss, making Roxy squeal and giggle in delight. “I do still have a headache, though,” she admits. “The second my abilities start recharging, though, they funnel that energy into fixing me before actually filling my battery.”

Dirk makes a disgusted noise at that and then asks, “Did it work?”

“The Signless, which he prefers to be called, has recovered and is under observation by Superman,” Jane informs him. “But he seems to be doing well and is eager to meet everyone. Karkat is in the other recovery room with Jake which is… why I left,” Jane says, blushing.

Dirk pulls the pillow off his face and sits up to look at her sideways, squinting in the light. “Why? Is he not okay?”

“Are you not okay?” Jane counters suspiciously.

“It's the lights and the headache,” Roxy informs her. “Dirk, sweetie? Your shades are in your sylladex,” she reminds him.

“Not what I asked,” Dirk grumbles, but he decaptchalogues his shades immediately. The pulls them
off immediately after being blasted in the face with bright strobe lighting. “I want it on record that Hal is an ass.”

“I think you mispronounced ‘sweetheart’,” Roxy teases.

“Karkat?” Dirk reminds them through his teeth. Oh man, he actually is in a mood.

“Oh, sorry, no, he's fine,” Jane says quickly. “They just seemed like they needed… privacy… for their, um, emotions…”

“They?” Dirk repeats.

“Karkat and Dave.”

“Dave was being emotional?”

“Yes.”

“I can see why you decided to leave.”

“Oh, shush,” Jane teases. “Anyway, the Suffer- Signless’s memories have faded like a dream and the physical effects are healing. But…”

“But?” Roxy repeats while Dirk shoves his shades back on his face to find out before she can even speak.

“The fuck?” he says, turning to Jane. “This is for real?”


“Batman requested an update from Terezi,” Jane explains. “He was concerned she might be seeing the same effects. He ended up having to ask the Titans to track her down. Not only is she confusing herself with Redglare, but it seems she and Vriska have tried to kill each other.”

“Oh my god, what?” Roxy screeches. “What the hell?! Why?!”

“Mindfang,” says Dirk. “It's also hit Kanaya and Sollux. Rose and Dave have actually improved. Jade and John aren't showing anything. Callie is fine. Mr. Crocker is fine.”

“This makes no sense,” Roxy objects. “Why is it hitting Vriska and Kanaya? Thief of Light and Sylph of Space? What does that have to do with alternate selves?”

“They're discussing that right now,” says Jane. “Calling in Fate and Raven and Zatanna and any other heavy magic users.”

“Raven said it was a god thing,” Dirk reminds them. “If ‘god thing’ applies to Karkat, it must apply to all of us, whether godtiered or not.”

“But we're not all blending,” says Jane.

“The trolls entered first,” Roxy realized. “Timing must be classpect and and intensity is entry order? Or maybe, like, timing would be entry order except that classpect interfered?”

“Hal says the time players are also fucking with the order,” says Dirk. “Trying to clarify, but he's fucking with me.”
“Shame on you, Dirk!” Roxy chastises. “He's only 13.”

Instead of snarking back, Dirk takes off his shades and hands them to Roxy. “See if you can get anything out of him,” he grunts. And then he flops back down on the bed and shoves the pillow over his face again.

TT: Wow, he's in a mood.
TT: rite?
TT: o wait hold on

- - timaeusTestified [TT] is now tipsyGnostalgic [TG] - -

TG: ok hi
TT: You do realize that I was not confused about who you are?
TG: yeah but mines better
TG: anyway what's the time players doin
TT: See, I would tell you, but you might flip your lid.
TG: meh im sure we've dealt with stupider
TT: It's not that, it's…
TT: I mean I'm kind of freaking out, and I'm only an emotionless machine.
TG: what?? what's goin on
TT: Roxy, I genuinely don't know how to tell you this, but…
TT: Well, think of the nature of a time player's abilities.
TT: As we learned from a certain green dude who shall go unnamed, any time player brought into existence has the potential to use their abilities to have always existed.
TT: For example, Damara interacting with us before we’ve ‘brought her through’.
TG: ok???
TT: So, maybe, just maybe, there is currently someone fucking with time that you four will have brought through but whom you haven't yet.
TG: besides damara and aradia and dave?
TT: Yes.
TG: … oh
TT: Yes.

Slowly, Roxy takes off the shades again. She looks at them in her hands. Then, she turns to Dirk. “Um, Dirk?”

“Hm?” Dirk grunts.

“Your Bro is present tense.”

Dirk gets out of the bed so fast that there may or may not be scorch marks, grabs the shades, and shoves them back on his face. “Show me.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

“Precious little fly-fish,” she coos. “I'm so saury aboat all this! But the situation is getting desperate, I'm shore you can tell!”
So the wife thinks I should be posting Junior League at the same time as finishing DCstuck just to ease transition. Still, updates are going to be more frequent here than there until I get DCstuck finished.
So this chapter is kind of shorter than average for this fic, but I'll make it up to you soon because this fic is a fucking **beast**. Like, okay, in the timing of the fic? The end plot (not including epilogue) takes place over four days. The four chapters of "One More Time" are Day 1. Day 2? Day 2 is **six and a half chapters long**. When is this thing ending? I don't fucking know; I'm still writing it.

“So…” Ollie says on the drive back to Star City. “That was The Handmaid?”

Rook just shrugs. He's still looking at the strife specibi in his hands. 2x1dentkind. The pictures on the cards look like wands. Gold colored. They seem to have jewels on them, but Rook can't tell from the tiny pictures what they're supposed to be, and he won't get a better look at the wands until the girls equip their new specibi. Why would it be a new specibi though? All three use wandkind already. Why is it calling these wands something else? Something about it strikes familiar in his game knowledge, but it had never come up in the beta session. Nepeta’s session, though…

“Look, I'm sorry today was a waste, but nothing has really gone how you thought it would, so fair to say you won’t…” Ollie doesn't finish.

“Die,” Rook finishes for him.

“… Yeah.” Ollie sighs out a breath and runs his hand through his hair.

“You know that beard makes you look like a douche, right?”

“I have been told. Look, Rook…”

“Yes, Queen?” And then Rook starts snickering. Then, he starts laughing.

“What?” Ollie asks.

“I just realized we both have chess names,” Rook giggles.

“Isn't that why you've been calling me ‘Queen’ this whole time?”

“Nah, man, I was calling you ‘Queen’ because I don't like you.”

“Ah.” Ollie sighs once more and tries again, “Rook, our plan was for me to train you as a hero. Get you a private tutor so the public hopefully won't see you enough to draw the obvious ‘these two brown-skinned kids with red hair and one and a half copper wings might just be the same person’ conclusions.”


“So, I've been thinking… what if we don't do that?”
“What?” Rook deadpans.

“What if we just concentrate on recovery and maybe get you into school. You can make friends. We're near L.A.; you're not the weirdest thing they've seen.”

“Keep me where I can't get stabbed,” says Rook, seeing right through him.

“Well... yeah.”

Rook snorts in derision, folds his arms, and digs his shoulders into the car seat. “I'm not Dave. I'm not afraid of that.”

“That's the point!” Ollie objects. “I- Well, actually, it wasn't the point, but it is now. What the hell, Rook?”

“What?” he asks blandly like he genuinely has no idea.

“You don't care if you're stabbed to death?” Ollie demands.

Rook just shrugs. “It's not like it affects anything.”

“Not like it- It affects you, Rook! You are a person who will be affected by dying!”

“Pft, like half a person at best,” Rook says with an eyeroll.

“That's not funny.”

“Maybe you should grow a sense of humor.”

“Maybe you should grow a sense of self-preservation!” Ollie objects. “You're not a sprite anymore! You're not disposable!”

“Then why are you disposing of me?” Rook snaps, still sulking with his eyes glued to the dashboard.

“Is that what you-? I didn’t-!” Ollie groans and rubs his temple only then realizing that he had been speeding about 20mph over. He lets off the gas a bit, and says, “Look, all I wanted was to ask what you thought.”

Rook snorts again. “What I think?”

“Yes, Rook, what you think. What do you think about the idea of going to school?”

Rook turns toward his window sullenly and watches the exits for one horse towns with shitty names pass by. “I think maybe if you didn't want a sidekick, you shouldn't have got one.”

Ollie doesn't say anything.

“You have to be kidding me,” Dick grumbles as he pulls to a stop along a spot of road that definitely isn't a parking area but is quickly becoming one. “It's rare to see even a handful of people outside this theater.”

Dirk glowers out the window at the throng of people. “Why's that?” he asks.

Dick glances toward his charge, but the only thing he can read on Dirk is the expected tension and anxiety. “It's an art theater,” he explains.
“As opposed to…?”

“A regular theater?” says Dick, confused.

“Where they show movies?” Dirk asks, and Dick nods. “Which are an artistic medium?”

“Well… yes, but… nevermind.” Dick frowns at the window. “What are they even all here for?” he wonders.

“*Year One*?” Dirk guesses.

Dick shoots him a disbelieving look. “I know you admire your brother, but reportedly *Year One* is an agonizingly incomprehensible dadaist experimental art film,” he reminds him.

Dirk shrugs. “He knows what he's doing.”

“Okay, just… Wait here.” Dick opens his door, checks the traffic, and then steps out and leaves Dirk parked. (Dirk is already on his tablet.) If the crowd is here for *Year One*, Dick wonders if Dirk will even be able to watch it in a full theater.

He skips right past the crowd and heads up to the box office. He's learned that if you act like you know what you're doing and move quickly enough, people will either assume you're supposed to be doing what you're doing or that you're too big of an asshole to even bother arguing with. Rich guy mode.

He steps up to the box office just as the previous customer steps aside and says, “Hey man, can I ask you something?”

The cashier blinks up at him. “Uh…”

“All these people here for *Year One*?”

“Yeah, man, ever since it hit the paper’s blog, more and more people have been coming out here. First, the Metropolitans started showing up, then people from other states showed up. We've even had some Canadians. We sell out every day.”

“Sell out?” says Dick. He points to the throng waiting impatiently behind him. “Then what are they here for?”

“Oh, well, I say sell out, but we have tickets available for next week.”

“Next week?” Dick hasn't heard of this ever from any theater for any movie.

“Well, this is one of four theaters in the country where it’s showing,” says the cashier. “The other three are in Texas. There's a fifth copy online, but it's a personal server, so it keeps crashing.”

“Hey, man, you gonna buy a ticket or what?” demands the customer behind him.

“Sorry, sorry,” Dick says, holding up a placating hand. He turns back to the cashier. “One more question: Do you happen to know who all this profit goes to?”

“Oh, uh, this guy?” says the cashier. “This… Rillol person? He wants to stay anonymous right now. So it's in the contract that 50% of the profit has to go back into the community.”

“In what way?” Dick asks while the guy behind him complains that he'd said only one more question.
The cashier appears confused. “Like charity?”

“Yeah, I got that,” says Dick. “But what kind of charity?”

Cashier shrugs. “Anything local,” he says. “Mostly doesn't matter but like if the manager does something horrible with it, the guy won't give us another movie, so…”

“Right.”

“Look, are you going to move now or not?” the guy behind him demands.

Dick glances back at him with an amused look and asks, “You know this is for next week's show, right? You're not going to miss it.”

And then, while the guy is still bitching too loudly for anyone to hear what Dick is whispering to the cashier, Dick pays in advance for 100 tickets to be handed out only as each customer starts to pay for their ticket so that no one will take more than they need. Yes, including the yelling guy. He then buys another two for himself and Dirk and heads back to the car.

Dirk is still tapping lines of code into the tablet and barely even looks up when Dick sits in the driver's seat again. “How'd it go?” he asks.

“Unexpectedly informative,” Dick tells him. “So, I had to buy us tickets for next week, but apparently there's a copy online.”

Dirk nods. “Yeah, but the server keeps crashing,” he says. “And there's bots that chase down uploaded copies.”

“Well, according to this random cashier who, I admit, may be a fallible source, the server keeps crashing because it's a personal server.”

That gets Dirk's attention. “So if Hal traces the physical server location…”

“There's a chance it could tell us where RiLal is,” Dick tells him. He's surprised though when instead of immediately jumping to work, Dirk chews his lip and turns toward his window. “What?” asks Dick.

“He's been here at least long enough to drop off these films and set up a server,” says Dirk. “So if he wanted to see me… he could have just… dropped in.”

Dick frowns and tells him, “Look, this dude built a meteor-proof apartment in the exact location a meteor baby was foretold to fall, completely stocked to survive the end of the world. He obviously gives at least somewhat of a shit about you. If he thinks he can't talk to you, it's probably either the same anxiety that I have so far witnessed in every other member of your family, or it's a time thing.”

Dirk lifts an eyebrow at him. “Rose doesn't have anxiety,” he says.

Dick rolls his eyes. “Rose is practically you,” he counters. “She's just better at hiding it.”

Dirk looks down at his hands, uncertain, but his shoulders seem to have relaxed an iota. “So what if it is a time thing?” he asks. “What if approaching him first is some kind of catastrophic fuckup?”

Dick thinks about that for all of five seconds, then shrugs and says, “Alright, you track him down, and I'll call him first.”
Booster shrieks and drops his coffee after turning around in his kitchen to come face-to-face with Aradia. She's able to grab the mug before it hits the floor, but most of the coffee sloshes over the side. “Oh, shoot! Sorry!” she cries, immediately setting the mug aside and grabbing the nearest kitchen towel to mop up the mess.

Booster stares down at his sidekick. “Aradia?”

“Yes, Booster?”

“How’d you get in here?”

“Oh, um.” Aradia stands up, wrings out the now brown-stained tea towel into the sink. She brushes some loose curls out of her face, but doesn't face Booster yet. Her wings flutter nervously. “I did knock, but you didn't answer, so I sat out there for a while, wondering if I should call you or wait longer or what. Then, future me let me in as she was leaving, so I took that as permission and just followed the loop back to where she'd started, and then I accidentally surprised you, and-”

“Okay, okay, we're at the part that I was there for,” Booster says. He steps around into her field of vision to let her know she doesn't have to shy back from him, and it's so odd that she still manages to look up at him through her eyelashes when she wants to even though she's now taller than him, not to mention that he's seen her in ferocious mode before. “Look, Aradia, I wasn't mad at you, I just… Have you ever lost someone? That you couldn't talk to?”

Aradia leans against the edge of the sink and thinks. “Well, I couldn't really talk to my lusus after she passed,” she admits. “Animals don't really leave the same signature. I think… I think the closest would be when Vriska attacked Tavros. He didn't die of it, but it was close for a while. Since he wasn't dead, I didn't have a backup way to communicate with him while he wasn't online, and I just…” She shakes her head. “I was so mad and so worried, and I sent her victims after her, but none of it was enough. Terezi tried to make me stop, but I didn't care. I didn't care if Vriska lashed out at me. I just wanted her to suffer.”

“Yeah, I get that,” says Booster. He refills his coffee, then heads back toward the living room, expecting her to follow. She does, and he sits at one end of the couch (white leather and absurdly expensive -- Booster has never known how to hold onto his money.) and gestures for her to sit next to him. She does.

Finally, Booster says, “Look, I'm no good at this honesty stuff, and I still haven't had time to process this but, first of all, I am not mad at you. I'm… upset by the situation. I was already embarrassed that my arm had been revealed to still have issues…”

“Booster, we don't care about that,” says Aradia. “Many of us have or have had prosthesis. I had an entirely prosthetic body!”

“But I do,” Booster tells her. “And it's humiliating enough to know that I don't have the capacity to deal with this but that now people know that I haven't been dealing with it, and Ted… Jesus, if I break Ted's arm, what am I going to do?”

Aradia flounders, still not sure what she's supposed to do. “Well, I could… I mean, I don't understand why you don't want me to… If I knew why…”

“Yeah, I know,” Booster sighs. He leans forward, sets his coffee on the table, and cradles his head in his hands. “That makes the most sense. I know it does, but I can't-.” And then out comes the sob he's been trying to hold in and his shoulders shake and he's a mess, and he never wanted her to see him like this.
“But… why?” Aradia asks gently.

“Because I failed him,” Booster says, the words tumbling out before he's even realized them, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I didn't just fail to save him, I made it so he had to choose. He didn't just get burnt, because of me, he was obligated to throw himself directly into the fire. And I can't just-I can't just face that man and say, 'Hey, buddy, sorry I got you double super dead, but do you think you could fix this toy for me so that my rep isn't damaged?'”

At some point in that rambling nonsense, Aradia had pulled him into her arms, surrounding him with her electric blanket warmth, his sobbing face tucked into her shoulder where he could smell the wool wax scent of her hair. “Booster, I assure you that is not what he thinks,” she tells him gently.

“That only makes it worse,” he sobs.

She sighs heavily, but she doesn't argue. She just holds him and lets him cry himself out.

When Rook wakes up, the first thing he registers is dull muscle ache in his arms and cramped pressure on his wings, and the first thing he thinks is that he's in the hospital again. Then, he opens his eyes and sees red. Dead red. Mutant red. Candy apple red. He tries to wipe the sleep out of his eyes, and that's when he realizes that he's tied to a chair, wrists lashed tightly together around the back. He tries to pull, tries to dig his talons in, tries to flap his wing, but it's no use. He tries to decapchalogues a weapon or at least his iShades, but finds that somehow his sylladex has been locked.

He blinks rapidly to clear his vision and looks around again.

He is completely surrounded by huge, hulking, candy red floating robots with a slight insectile design. Drones? But how-?

Oh God.

He pulls harder. He pulls until he can't feel his fingertips, until he can hear his bones crack under the pressure, until his wings start to bruise.

He stops, freezes in terror, unable to breathe when he hears the clack-clack-clack of high heels on hard floor behind him. “Oh no!” an unfamiliar voice coos. “Poor guppy! Look what she's done to you!”

The black tangles creep around into his field of vision before any other part of her does. A writhing black mass with no discernable dimension that slowly blocks out the waiting drones from his view. Two long black-armored arms with wrists holding a hundred gold bangles each and fingers clad in a thousand rings and long, long claws painted bright pink drape over his shoulders, and he'd scream if he wasn't too terrified to move. And then she fucking nuzzles the side of his face WHAT THE SHIT

“Precious little fly-fish,” she coos. “I'm so saury about all this! But the situation is getting desperate, I'm shore you can tell!”

“Wh-what?” he somehow manages to ask.

The arms leave him, and the heels clack again as she steps around in front of him. The Empress. Her Imperious Condescension. She frowns down at him. “We know you didn't come through with the rest, buoy. You and that beach came through after. So they obvs got the same problem we do.” Her mannerisms change yet again, and she leans forward, grinning predatorily, so wide it looks like the top half of her head may not be well attached to the bottom half. “Somehow they split you off. And
you gonna tell me how.” She taps a long pink claw against his throat. “Or else.”

Well.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

_Rook is not in the room._

_Rook’s window is open._

_Rook is not in the room, and his window is open._
“Rook! Wake up!” Ollie calls up the stairs for the umpteenth time. He waits, but receives no answer. “I swear to god…” he grumbles to himself as he finally gives up and trots back up the stairs, turning right toward what had been, a month ago, a guest room. He slams his fist on the door. “Rook! Get up!”

Still nothing.

“Look, be as pissy as you want, but you still need to get up and eat breakfast!”

Still nothing. “Alright, I'm coming in,” Ollie shouts through the door. “You have five seconds to get your hand out of your pants!” He counts to ten before opening the door, just to be safe.

Rook is not in the room.

Rook’s window is open.

Rook is not in the room, and his window is open.

Ollie runs to the window. A three-story drop into a holly bush isn't a good idea for anyone, but Ollie thinks maybe he sees some copper feathers down there. When he finds Rook, he's going to murder him.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and starts up the GPS locator app that's programmed for Rook’s phone. It claims the phone is still at the home address, but sometimes the satellite takes a few minutes to update. So Ollie uses that time to actually call Rook in the futile hope that the kid will actually answer.

Rook’s phone rings behind him.

Slowly, Ollie turns and walks back around the room, following the sound to Rook’s bedside table. He hangs up, puts his phone away in his pocket, and opens the drawer. There is Rook’s phone and iPad as well as the three "strife" cards The Handmaid had given him yesterday.

Ollie's chest tightens with worry, and he turns back to face the room and starts taking inventory. The sheets are shredded as if by claws, but that's normal for Rook and isn't necessarily a sign of struggle. The closet is nearly empty, most of Rook’s clothing (which is still pretty sparse, but it's difficult to get the kid to accept gifts or go outside or even give any indication as to whether he likes a thing) is on the floor, but this is also normal. His study materials are on his desk. So is his laptop. Rook left without his laptop or his phone or his iPad? He probably has his iShades, at least, but Ollie has never been able to sync the GPS on those.

Ollie pulls out his own phone again and brings up his security app, then summons the exterior footage from last night. Sure enough, around 4am, Rook climbs out his bedroom window, lands in the bush, and eventually extracts himself and leaves. All by himself.

Ollie swears under his breath and brings up Dinah’s number. It rings a few times before she answers, voice still slurred with sleep, “What?”
“Do you know if Rook is there?” Ollie blurts out, only realizing afterward that this is probably the most confusing way to start this conversation.

“Hn? Why'd Rook be here?”

“Because he snuck out his window at four in the morning and hasn't come back.” Having mentioned the window, Ollie realizes that he should probably shut it back for now and does so.

There's a long pause on the other end, and then finally Dinah says, “Are you fuckin’ serious?”

Ollie sighs wearily. “Yep,” he says.

“Alright, hold on. I'll check with Roxy and Calliope.” There's the shuffling sounds of Dinah clambering out of bed and setting the phone down. Then, there's the muffled sound of her shouting for Roxy. After some more shouting, she finally comes back to the phone. “Roxy hasn't heard from him. She checked with Jade, cuz he would've needed her to get any further than the city, but she hasn't seen him, either.”

“Right. Jade. Jade can…”

“Somehow, she can't find him. Ollie, I'm concerned.”

Ollie quickly checks the footage on his phone again. “So am I,” he says. “But Rook pretty clearly left of his own volition. He could be using time powers to evade her.”

“But Rook doesn't have time powers,” says Dinah.

“He… might,” Ollie admits. “That's kind of what we argued about yesterday. I didn't think he took it that hard, but yet again I prove to be absolutely shit at kids.”

“Hey, shut up,” Dinah snaps. “You don't have time to beat yourself up right now. Go find Rook. Kick yourself later. Roxy and I are already suiting up to go look for him.”

“Yeah, I'm going to follow different lead. Update me if you find anything?”

“Same. Good luck, Ollie.”

Tuba City is normally a four hour drive on a good day. Ollie may have sped a little. Ollie might have an angry state trooper still looking for him. But this isn't the kind of thing you do over the phone, and Ollie already suspects Rook may be headed east. Better to pick up an ally halfway there.

Ollie knocks on the door and pretends not to notice the neighbor peeking out at him from the edge of their curtain. He rocks impatiently on the balls of his feet, then knocks again.

Finally, the door opens, and a hunched old man glowers out at him. Time has not been kind to “Brave Bow” Deschene. “Um, hi,” Ollie says, the picture of articulateness.

Deschene rolls his eyes, turns back toward the interior of his house and calls out, “Roy! Your asshole wants to talk to you!”

“What?!” Roy calls back, and Deschene retreats back into the house rambling off some complaint that Ollie doesn't have a chance in hell of deciphering… not that he doesn't already know what Deschene thinks of him.

Eventually, Roy shows up at the door looking completely bemused. “What are you doing here?” he
asks. “You know I have a phone right? The tower is right over there, so my signal is fine. It's usually charged. Brave Bow has a landline hooked up to an honest-to-god rotary phone ‘just in case,’ if all else fails.” This sparks a new ramble from the old man somewhere in the background, but Roy ignores him.

“Yeah, I know,” Ollie says, running a hand back through his hair. “I just… Look, I really need your help.”

“Mine?” Roy asks, clearly surprised.

“I…” Ollie feels overwhelmingly nauseous, and he can't remember any of the speech he came up with on the three hour drive. Instead, he says, “Roy, I fucked up.”

Roy’s eyebrow comes up in confusion, but then he seems to realize the connection and his expression immediately hardens. “What the *fuck* did you do?” he demands through clenched teeth.

“You didn't have to hit me,” Ollie complains, rubbing his jaw as he follows the interstate eastward.

“I assure you I definitely did,” says Roy. He's busy on his phone, texting every shelter volunteer and hospital nurse he knows in Star City, Los Angeles, and the surrounding areas. Thanks to the nature of his work, he knows a lot of them, which is exactly why Ollie went to him.

“At the very least, you could have waited until this was over,” says Ollie.

“Nah, when the dog shits the carpet, you gotta rub his nose in it right away, right when he does it. Otherwise he doesn't understand what it's about, and it's just animal abuse.”

Ollie shoots him a Look, but Roy's focused on his phone. Ollie decides not to take the bait this time. Instead, he says, “OraNet Request: Address for Broderick Strider.”

“’Broderick’?” says Roy as a robotic voice tells Ollie he'll have to sign in again. “Doesn't he have the same name as Dirk?”

“Yeah, I might have been feeling spiteful while getting his papers in order,” Ollie admits with no shame. “Besides, two Dirks is confusing,” he says as he rubs the bridge of his nose with one hand. “I cannot take the time to re-set the Oracle interface. Why the hell did it sign me out in the first place?”

“You think two Dirks is too many?” Roy teases. “Because we know at least thirty Johns.”

“Yes, and they are every single one the bane of my existence.”

“Everyone you haven't slept with is the bane of your existence,” says Roy. “Have you even called this guy to see if Rook is there?”

“I don't trust him to give me a straight answer,” Ollie grumbles. “Besides, he wasn't answering.”

“Number in your contacts?”

“Yeah, under ‘Bro.’ You think he's more likely to answer a strange number?”

“Can't hurt.” Roy dials up the number on his own phone, then frowns as it rings and rings and rings before finally going to voicemail. He hangs up, brings up a different app, then dials again through it.

“What are you doing?” asks Ollie.
“Tracing the number to get his address, but there aren’t apartments near this cell tower,” says Roy.

“Yeah? What is?”

“Commercial area. Fire hall… Police department.”

Ollie hisses out another swear. “I'm gonna kill him,” he says. Roy is already dialing another number. “I'm going to ask him where Rook is, and then I'm going to kill him.”

“Yeah, shut up, okay?” says Roy, and then, “Yeah, hi, my name is Roy Harper. Would it be possible to ask if you have a Mr. Broderick ‘Bro’ Strider in custody at the moment? I'm a family friend that's been trying to locate him… Yes, I can wait.”

Roy looks to Ollie, but Ollie just keeps his eyes on the road and doesn't say anything. “You know murdering Bro won't change the fact that you're the one who fucked up here,” Roy tells him.

“No, but it will make me feel better.”

Roy almost argues that, but then the officer returns to the phone. “Yeah, still here… Thanks. Can I ask what…” Roy listens for a moment, then slowly leans forward and thumps his head against the dashboard. “Okay, look, was a juvenile with him at the time?... Yeah, okay, fair. We’re looking for a runaway from Star City, California named Rook Sprite. Rook used to be raised by his half brother, Broderick Strider, so that is the only lead we have right now….” Roy sits up again, thumping his head back against the headrest a few times. “Roy Harper, L.C.S.W. I'm a drug counselor for the Navajo Nation Police, and I've worked with various agencies across Arizona and southern California as a social worker and counselor for juveniles with drug problems. I also hold a private investigation license in the state of California…. Yes, I will wait.”

Roy mutes his phone and turns to Ollie again. “So why did you decide you need me specifically to help you on this?”

“You're an expert on runaways and also have unique insight on running away from me.”

“I didn't runaway from you; you kicked me out.”

“There were other incidents.”

“What inc-? Ollie, the Titans does not count!”


“Ugh,” says Roy. “My instinct is to say ‘I cannot fucking believe you right now’, but unfortunately, I know you far too well for that to be true.”

Ollie leans his elbow against the window sill and his head against his palm so he can rub at his temple. “Yeah, I know I'm an asshat. I'm sorry, okay? I fucked up. I keep fucking up. I don't know why I thought I could do this again.”

Roy frowns at him, but he doesn't say anything. Eventually, the cop’s voice comes back on the line, and Roy unmutes his phone. “Yeah, I'm here… Why, yes, officer, I do have a history of possession, which is why I can't vote in the United States. Thank you for asking! I don't suppose that file you're thumbing through has a date on it?... Testy? Yeah, actually, I am testy, because I'm in the process of driving across four states to look for a thirteen-year-old boy with a medical condition out on the streets who hasn't got so much as a cell phone on him if he gets in trouble. So yes, I'm a little testy that I'm being made to jump through hoops just to find out if I'm even looking in the right direction!”
Ollie snorts at "medical condition" but doesn't say anything. Roy likely added it to guilt the cop and to later explain, if necessary, why Rook is a bird.

Whatever the cop says in return makes Roy sigh heavily and glance at the clock on the dashboard. “We'll be lucky if we get there before midnight… Yeah, you do that… Thanks.” He hangs up with an angry flourish obviously meant to take the place of being able to slam the phone down on its cradle. He tells Ollie, “We can come interview Bro, but still no leads on Rook. Give me a minute to rest, and I'll get back to checking in with everyone I alerted in the Star County area.”

“Okay,” says Ollie because he can't think of anything else to say. Maybe thank you. He should probably say thank you.

But before he can, Roy continues, “So why don't we have Jade magic us there? Kind of losing time here, Ols.”

“She's keeping a meditative watch out for his signature or whatever,” Ollie explains. “I don't want to distract her.”

“And we're not using League teleporters or Raven or something because…?”

Ollie sighs heavily and continues rubbing at his temple. “To be honest?” He gestures to the roadside next to them. “I have the stupid vague hope I'm just going to see him walking the road along the way.”

Roy seems to accept that answer and goes silent again.

“So what's going on with Bro?” asks Ollie.

“Possession with intent to distribute.”

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!”

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

He smirks down at her and says, “Come with me if you want to live.” His breath stinks of alcohol.

Milagro huffs angrily. “Is that supposed to be a threat? I know a Green Lantern!”

“I… what? No, it’s a Terminator reference. Where is your mother?” demands the man.
Witsy Witsy Araña

Chapter Notes

I don't have my usual Spanish proof-reader because I'm having problems with Slack, and I've only got the basics, so feel free to correct me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

- - timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering acrobaticChanticlear [AC] - -

TT: Has anyone told you yet that Rook is missing?
AC: wtf no?????
TT: That’s what I thought.
TT: This is all being handled extremely poorly.
AC: Dirk, we are in the same house right now. You can come talk to my face.
TT: Actually, I cannot, because I do not have a face, as I am not Dirk.
AC: Oh, right, red text.
AC: Why don’t you get your own handle?
TT: I have a better question: Why doesn’t he get his own handle?
AC: For crying out loud… What’s going on with Rook?
TT: So Green Arrow discovered this morning that Rook was not in the house but all his stuff had been left behind in his room. So Green Arrow checks the camera outside Rook’s room, and low and behold he climbed out the window at 4am.
AC: wtf
TT: Green Arrow blames himself because of a shitty argument. Roxy and Black Canary are scouring Star City while Green Arrow and Arsenal head to Dallas to try Bro. Few heroes know about it yet because right now, it’s believed to be a personal issue that Green Arrow can handle.
AC: Arsenal and Green Arrow are working together?
TT: Apparently, Arsenal has expertise in this bullshit.
AC: … sort of.
TT: Point is, I think they’re wrong. I don’t think Rook ran away.
AC: Based on what?
TT: 1) Roxy asked Jade to locate him. Jade cannot. Current theory is that Rook isn’t even in the current time frame, but Rook has only just started showing signs of time powers and definitely does not know how to use them yet.
TT: 2) I’ve hacked Green Arrow’s security system to comb through the video files more thoroughly and found a few inconsistencies with the current theory. This first shot is from further away from the window, after Rook extracts himself from the bush.

TT has transferred file dumbassbirdboy.mov

AC: What am I looking at?
AC: Why is he trying to eat his wing?
TT: Repeatedly across several videos as he walks off the property, he forgets that he cannot groom his wings with a beak anymore. Which, to the best of my knowledge, normally happens once every other week or so, when he’s very distracted.
AC: Why do you even have these metrics?
TT: Hey, funny thought: You know who else started acting uncharacteristically more animalistic when their animal mind was being controlled?

TT has transferred file grimbark.mov

AC: Wait, I thought that happened in the “Retcon Timeline.”

TT: Like many others, I am experiencing an unexpected synchronization of my data.

AC: Great. Awesome. So, you think Peixes kidnapped him by commanding his crow side to leave? Isn’t that kind of a logic jump?

TT: It would be except for the motion detection security lights. I’ve made a map to show you the data I accumulated.

TT has transferred file lights.gif

TT: As you can see, a light by the northwest corner of the fence is triggered 1 minute 32 seconds before the lights outside Rook’s bedroom are triggered. As Rook crosses areas of the property with lights, they turn on, leading him to the northwest corner, which has remained on this entire time.

AC: He went to meet someone.

TT: Yes.

AC: Someone with Void powers?

TT: Before you ask, no it definitely wasn’t Roxy. She’s worried sick.

TT: It seems The Condesce can obtain the abilities of other trolls. It is thus possible that she may have Void powers. It is also possible that Makara still has some of Zahhak’s blood in his sylladex, which should be good enough for a simple cloaking.

AC: Alright. I’ll go talk to Bruce.

TT: No, don’t.

AC: Why??

TT: Because Dirk and I already told him. He insisted we let Green Arrow handle this. Dirk is currently still trying to argue it.

AC: But Green Arrow doesn’t know?

TT: And telling him may distract him from what I believe may be a very good lead.

AC: The fuck?

AC: Okay, screw it. This isn’t a bat mission anyway. I think I have a better team in mind.

AC: If I get the resources together, can you and Dirk figure out where she is despite the Void powers? Use your algorithms and mad haxor skillz to narrow the possibilities?

TT: I’ll start on it, but the data is slim.

AC: That’s fine. I’ve got a lead of my own.

AC: Oh and do me a favor and send an alert through the Oracle Network to let all heroes with animal forms or animal speech or animal control know that they could be compromised?

TT: Aye aye, Captain.

AC: And no sea puns.

- - acrobaticChanticlear [AC] ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT] - -

“I fished you so much, you minnow?” says the Condesce. Except it’s not the Condesce just now. She’s so many people. You’re becoming many people, too. “I know we didn’t spend that much time together, but I piked you a lot! You were always so strong and brave and compassionate! I think you were our best fighter! And you always had the best puns!”

You… you remember her. You remember the way she smiled at you. Gave you high fives for your best kills.
“You’re not supposed to be here, either,” she says. “Just like us. If you can talk him around… Convince him to tell us how it’s done… We’ll bring you with us.”

The giggle escapes without your permission. “He already told you!” you find yourself pleading. “You can’t do it yourself. Only surrender will free you!”

She grabs you by the throat, and there. There is the Condesce. She’s never gone for long. “I AM TIRED OF YOUR GAMES!” she screams at you, warm blood trickling down your neck and soaking into your shirt from where her claws puncture skin that’s far more delicate than it used to be. “DO YOU REALLY THINK YOU CAN TRICK ME INTO LETTING MYSELF BE CAPTURED? I AM THE MOTHERSUCKING - !”

Something cracks in your spine. Your vision blackouts.

“Awe, shit. Why’s humans so delicate?”

And then it’s yesterday again. You’re tied to the chair again. Your wing is cramped. She hasn’t lost her patience yet, and she asks, for what she probably thinks is only the third or fourth time, “How did you do it?

_____________________________

Knock knock knock

“Milagro, ¡responde la puerta! ¡Estoy ocupado aquí!”

“¡En un minuto!” Milagro Reyes may or may not turn the television up slightly louder. She doesn’t want to miss the good part.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“¡ACTUALMENTE, MILAGRO!”

“¡Bieeeen!” Milagro sulks as she heads toward the door, craning her head to see the television as long as possible.

She swings the door open just as the man standing in front of it raises his hand to knock again. She looks at him. He looks at her. She looks at the weird, massive caterpillar sitting on his shoulder. He raises an eyebrow above dark aviator-style sunglasses.

She puts her hands on her hips, scowls up at him, and demands, “What do you want?”

He smirks down at her and says, “Come with me if you want to live.” His breath stinks of alcohol.

Milagro huffs angrily. “Is that supposed to be a threat? I know a Green Lantern!”

“I… what? No, it’s a Terminator reference. Where is your mother?” demands the man.

“¡Mamá!” Milagro calls back into the house. “A drunkard wants to talk to you!”

“I’m not a drunkard!” the man complains. “I have not had nearly enough to drink yet.”

A moment later, Bianca Reyes comes to the door, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. “What is it?” she asks him.

Before the man can reply, Milagro informs her, “He wants to threaten us.”
“What? Milagro, you close the door in that case!” Bianca tells her daughter.

The man pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m not - ”

“I’ll have you know I know a Green Lantern!” Bianca says, shoving a finger in his face with the same hand holding the towel. “And the Blue Beetle!”

“Yeah, I know, because he’s your son,” the man snaps irritably, which successfully shocks her into taking a step back. “But they’re not going to be here in a half hour when imperial drones come looking for you. I haven’t got time to try and track them down and convince them to save you from a threat they haven’t seen yet, but I’ve got just enough time to convince you. Let’s try not to be here when it happens.”

“What’s an ‘imperial drone’?” Bianca asks skeptically.

“It’s a thing that wants to kill you! How much do you need to know?” he demands.

“Excuse me if I do not immediately trust a man who stinks of alcohol,” Bianca argues, crossing her arms.

“I - Ugh.” The man strokes his nose again. “Look, I’m sorry, I wouldn’t have started the party if I knew it was going to be cancelled in favor of saving you, but I’m not a seer, just a knight. I react after. Is your husband home?”

“No, he’s at work, but he would have you talk to me anyway,” says Bianca.

“Good,” says the man. “Because I only have two hands.”

“Wh - Hey!” Bianca and Milagro cry as the man grabs them by the shoulders and the world blurs around them. Suddenly, they’re standing on the porch of the smoldering ruins of their home, and the man is gone.

“Damara?” Signless asks, suddenly standing, and Superman turns to see that Aradia has suddenly arrived.

“You’re not supposed to - ” he starts to protest, but she interrupts, “We don’t have time! Sorry. I mean, I have time, but you don’t. Here!” She shoves a note into his hand, then lunges forward, grabs Signless by the wrist, and disappears again in a flash of music.

Superman raises an eyebrow and unfolds the note, deciding to wait to sound the alarms until after an explanation has been made. Unfortunately, the note offers no such explanation, only instruction. In his own handwriting, on a page from a Daily Planet notepad, it says only “GO HOME NOW”

“So, here’s the deal,” says Nightwing, standing in a narrow, unpaved lot between two apartments about a block down from the old squatters’ house he knows Las Arañas has holed up in. “We don’t have a clue what to expect in there. That’s why I’ve covered my bases. As per usual, I’ll be running tactics and leading the hand-to-hand combat. Starfire will be leading where pure strength is needed, as well as using her starbolts where needed. Cyborg will be running second on strength and leading where tech savvy is needed, also supplying sonic weaponry where needed. He has Hal to back him up on tech, but Hal - and I know you can hear me - let Cyborg lead. Raven is running lead on magic as well as feeding us information and running interference. Prince of Heart is backing me up on hand-to-hand and tactics. Any questions?”
“Yeah,” says Dirk, nodding toward the fire escape above them. “What’s she adding to the team?”

“She?” Nightwing turns to the fire escape and sees, of all people, Vriska Serket sitting above them, watching with a bored expression. “Serket, why are you following us?”

She rolls her eyes. “Wow, take that ego down a notch, Nitewing. I wasn’t following you. I was already nearby when you showed up, so of course I came over to see what was up.”

“She’s telling the truth,” says Raven.

“Yeah, she usually doesn’t lie,” Nightwing informs her. “She just twists the truth into whatever she wants it to be.”

“Whatever,” Vriska says, turning away to start climbing back to the roof. “You’re not that interesting.”

“Hey, wait!” says Cyborg. And Vriska waits. “You’ve been stalking Tarantula, haven’t you? That’s why you were already in the area? Maybe you’re insulted by her spider theme?”

“I’m not insulted; I’m curious,” Vriska huffs. “And bored. This stupid memory issue took my moirail from me, and now I’ve got nothing to do.”

“How long have you been watching them?” asks Nightwing.

Vriska shrugs. “A few days. After this.” She gestures to the ring of cerulean bruising circling her neck.

“These memory issues, can you stay yourself in combat?” asks Nightwing.

Vriska shrugs again. “Maybe.” She points to Dirk and says, “It seems to be easier where he is. That’s why I went to Gotham in the first place.”

This seems to surprise Dirk, but he says nothing.

Nightwing sighs and glances to his friends. Cyborg shrugs but looks fairly expectant. Starfire nods in assent. Raven shrugs indifferently. Dirk remains blank, apparently abstaining. Nightwing turns back to Vriska and says, “If you can abstain from killing or severely maiming, then I would appreciate it if you joined us on this mission.”

“Why are you so obsessed with not killing your enemy?” Vriska demands. “It just gives them more opportunity to kill you.”

Cyborg and Raven immediately look to Nightwing to see how he’d handle an insult that strikes so close to home, but he just shrugs it off. “It’s my one and only condition,” he says instead of justifying himself.


Nightwing frowns and leans in toward her. “Star, you really cannot kill her,” he whispers.

“Of course not, dear,” she says with a predatory smile. “Dead people can’t answer questions.”

Nightwing blinks, then turns to Cyborg. “When did she get so scary?” he asks.

“Man, she was always scary. But you were blinded by the fact that you were eighteen and she was a glittering gold nudist in need of rescue,” Cyborg taunts him.
“... Fair.”

“So what is the mission?” asks Vriska.

“We think Tarantula knows where Condesce is,” says Dirk. “Our intention is to subdue the other Arañas and force Tarantula to give up info.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to have a little luck on our side,” Raven says.

Vriska considers very briefly, then nods. “Okay, I’m in. You’re obviously in desperate need of my help.”

“Obviously,” Nightwing says dryly. He turns to Raven. “Positions,” he tells her. Raven promptly disappears in a cloud of smoke. He turns to the others. “Make sure you’re ready. We don’t have time to chase Tarantula all over the city.”

Dirk draws his sword from his sylladex. Cyborg powers up his sonic weaponry while also subduing the various lights on his chassis. Starfire’s hair lights up with its fiery contrail while her eyes and hands begin glowing neon green. Vriska tosses her dice into the air and draws a pair of cobalt knives.

Another puff of smoke, and Raven returns to them. She squats on the ground and begins drawing in the dirt of the lot with her finger. “This is the structure of the building. It has two floors, one above ground, and one basement. Most of Las Arañas are on the first floor. Tarantula and a few others are in the basement. There is an exterior door to the basement here, but it’s tight and narrow, making it easy to barricade. There are three first floor entrances here, here, and here. These dots are the current distribution of Las Arañas, though obviously they are capable of moving.”

Nightwing nods. “Okay. Go back in shadow and prepare to run interference and use magic where needed. Cyborg, Vriska, Dirk, you’re taking the upstairs. Make a big noise. Starfire, you’re taking the basement with me.”

Cyborg nods and adds the order, “Hal, full system penetration, but don’t get their attention yet.” He glances to Nightwing and asks, “Lights out signal?”

“Obviously.”

The group disperses and takes their positions outside the house. Despite the fact that it makes her easier to see, Starfire refuses to turn down her light show. Nightwing decides it’s not worth arguing; Raven is probably shadowing the windows anyway, as they hadn’t been painted black an hour ago. He keeps an eye on the exterior lights instead to await the signal as he crouches next to the basement door, hand on the knob. The knob turns, luckily, so entry should be easy enough.

The exterior lights turn off.

Nightwing throws open the door and steps immediately aside to let Starfire blast ahead with her better vision and faster abilities. She blinds the room and blasts the girls unconscious while Nightwing slams the door shut, locks it, and then breaks the lock with a well-placed kick. He’s going to regret that when his heel is painfully purple tomorrow, but right now it works fine.

“Nightwing?” Starfire sounds uncertain, and when he turns, he sees why. She’s in a standoff with Tarantula, easily able to take her down with a starbolt, but unnerved by the fact that Tarantula hasn’t moved an inch since they entered.

In the darkness of a room lit only by Starfire’s contrail, it’s much easier to see the circuitry that
radiates out from the earpiece Tarantula wears, glowing red as it penetrates her eyes, her spine, her brain. Her gaze glows red with the Condesce’s influence.

She’s watching him. Face blank. Waiting.

“Are you even her?” Nightwing asks.

Instead of asking, Tarantula turns toward the stairs. One of her Arañas comes down, pulling along a very angry Vriska by the hair. “Tarantula! There’s two more of them upstairs, attacking us! We think there may also - !” She stops, three quarters of the way down the stairs, when she notes the stand off between Starfire, Nightwing, and Tarantula, with four other Arañas unconscious on the floor.

Tarantula ignores the girl’s trepidation and the situation at hand. She walks toward Vriska, and Starfire raises her hands to fire starbolts but still waits for an indication on whether that’s the right move. Tarantula stops a few feet from the stairs, and tilts her head to look the troll in the eyes. “She’s right about you,” Tarantula says. “You’re a much worse fighter without your ability. Did you really think anyone under her control would have luck to steal?”

Instead of answering, Vriska hisses and spits at her. Upstairs, they can still hear the blasts of Cyborg’s weaponry. Dirk could have knocked them all out by now, but the implied order had been to cause a distraction. Tarantula eyes the ceiling above her, then turns to the girl holding Vriska. “Let her go,” she orders. “Tell the girls we’re done here. Leave. Go home.”


“Now.”

The girl glances to Nightwing and Starfire, then drops Vriska and makes a run for it. Ever petty, Vriska reaches out to trip her on the stairs. The girl bloodies her jaw on the stair railing, but quickly recovers and escapes upstairs anyway.

Nightwing draws his sticks and demands, “What are you playing at, Catalina?”

Tarantula laughs a bitter huff of a laugh and turns to him. “You don’t get it, do you?” she says. “She’s already gotten what she needs from me. I’m only still here to distract you.” She steps toward Nightwing, sneering cruelly, but Nightwing is no longer sure if it’s aimed at him or herself. “She saw this coming. She’s seen everything. And you’ve played right into her hands. Followed all the little herrings while she made her arrangements.”

“What arrangements?” Nightwing demands, tensing in anticipation a fight. He tries to swallow down the bile that rises in his throat as she keeps stepping closer.


“It’s not like that,” Nightwing insists. “However we may have come into existence, we’re still ourselves. We’re still people. We still have souls. I’ve seen the evidence.”

Tarantula laughs. “Ever the optimist, Dick,” she says, and she sees the way he flinches at his name, despite the fact that he had just called her Catalina. She smirks with a cruel pity. “You remember telling me your name, Dick? Do you remember which issue that happened in?”

“You obviously have some measure of self-control,” says Dick. “Help us, and we’ll help you.”

She ignores him and continues, “So I guess it’s obvious that I could know Bruce Wayne, Damian
Wayne, Cassandra Cain, even Tim Drake. I mean, the family connection is so obvious, isn’t it? Hell, it’s a shock no one’s guessed Kory Anders before. Bad writing, I guess.”

Dick swallows again and tries to make a placating gesture, but his hands tremble and he can’t let go of his escrima sticks. “We want to know where she’s hiding. Where she might have taken Rook Sprite,” he insists. “Can you tell us that?”

“That’s not the right question, Dick,” Tarantula tells him. “What you need to ask yourself is how I know about Barbara Gordon and Kate Kane.”

Dick freezes.

“How -?”

“Clark Kent. Kara Zor-El. Connor Kent. Lois Lane.”

“I - ”


“Who -?”


“Shut up,” Nightwing hisses. “What is she planning?”

“Do you want me to shut up or tell you what she’s planning?” Tarantula taunts him.

“Guys?” Cyborg calls down. “How’s it going down there? Everyone up here left.”

“Secure the area!” Nightwing commands. He hopes his shaking voice manages to be convincing.

Starfire steps forward to Tarantula, raising a glowing fist in threat. “How does she know these things? What does she plan on doing with the information?”

Tarantula rolls her eyes. “She’s raised five human children on two earths at three different times, spanning a total 700 years,” she says. “You really think she never read a fucking comic book?”

“Oh god.” Nightwing feels ill. This whole time… Their one advantage…

“She plans to win,” says Tarantula. “They defeated her captor. They’ve provided the means to resurrecting her race. Now all she needs is a new planet to put it all on. And she doesn’t plan on sharing.”

“Why is she letting you tell us all this?” Vriska demands, now sitting on the stairs and wiping at her split lip with an air similar to that of a cat that’s had its tail stepped on.

“Because it’s my second to last command,” she says. She gestures to the glowing red circuitry that’s taken over half her face. “This doesn’t puppet me. It just forces compliance. She’s never cared about the details. So long as, in the end, I obey.”
“Your second-to-last?” Nightwing repeats.

Tarantula turns to him and smirks again. “You know the irony of all this?” she asks. “I think she’s going to make you do what I never could. And I truly hope you will.”

“What’s your last command?” Nightwing demands.

Instead of answering, Tarantula’s circuitry glows brighter, she seizes briefly, then the circuitry goes dark, and she drops to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

“CATALINA!”

He pushes past Starfire. He checks her pulse. He attempts CPR. None of it does any good.

This…

This wasn’t what was supposed to happen.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

Barry groans and runs a hand down his face. “Awe, crap.”

“Called it,” says Iris in a voice that clearly communicates that she is not happy about being right. “I want it on record that I totally called this, and also it’s your fault.”
Alberto Reyes looks up when he hears the screech of tires outside his shop. Isn’t that Jaime’s friend Paco’s car? And Brenda del Vecchio running toward him as though she’d gotten out of the car before it had even come to a full stop. “Mr. Reyes! Mr. Reyes!” she shouts. “You have to come, please!”

“What has happened?” Alberto demands, wiping his hands clean on a spare rag. “Is Jaime okay?”

“I don’t - Last I heard he was in San Francisco, so probably? I don’t know what’s happening, I just - ” Tears stream down Brenda’s face, which has already started getting snotty, making it difficult for her to speak clearly. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s - We have to go!” As soon as she’s beside him, she’s already pulling him toward Paco’s car.

“Go where?” demands Alberto, trying to get her to slow down as he struggles to keep up in the conversation as well as physically, only barely being able to grab his cane before she pulls him too far. “What about everyone else?”

Brenda freezes, eyes wide. “I don’t - Your house, it - ”

The horn suddenly honks, and both turn to see Paco scrambling from the car, raising his fist at a tall, slim man in a blood red suit who is suddenly standing behind Paco’s car. Next to him is something that looks a lot like the reach except it has hair and horns and a Chinese dress. “Where did you come from?” Paco demands.

“The Future,” says the man. “And I’m here to tell you that Bianca and Milagro Reyes are fine. Head to this address, and you’ll see them soon.” He holds out a piece of paper to Paco. Paco does not take it, instead inching further back.

The alien points in the air with a big, gold, bejeweled staff. “Crockerr,” it says.

The man follows her gaze and scowls. “Goddammit.”

Alberto risks a glance toward the subject of their attention, seeing only faint red dots in distant sky.

The man holds the slip of paper again out to Paco, who again steps back toward Brenda. “Oh, for fuck’s sake! I am too drunk for this!” the man snaps. He reaches into Paco’s open door and drops the slip on Paco’s dashboard. He then turns back to the alien and grabs its hand, the two disappearing with a noise like a remixed windchime.

“BOOSTER!” shouts the all-too-familiar voice of Aradia Megido from the main room of his apartment.

Booster groans and pulls himself out of bed. “Christ, Aradia, you couldn’t have time traveled too after I’d gotten my ten hours beauty sleep?!?” he calls back as he pulls on yesterday’s pants one-handed and heads into the main room. “I don’t know if somehow you forgot how draining last n - ” He stops mid-sentence as he comes face-to-face with Aradia and an unknown adult troll. “Uh?”

“Sorry, no, I couldn’t wait,” Aradia babbles. “Because you won’t be here in another few hours.
because I already will have taken you from this time? Sorry, I’m from the future.”

Booster rubs the sleep out of his eyes, trying to parse the new information. “Okay?” he says. “And you are?” He nods to the other troll.

“Oh, um, Signless,” the troll says awkwardly.

Booster blinks. Blinks again. Then, he says, “Aren’t you supposed to be in quarantine?”

“Um, yes, but Damara told me to come with her as she sent Superman on some other quest,” Signless answers.

Confused, Booster returns his attention to Aradia. “Rip and Dams are in on this?”

“Oh! Right, no, sorry!” Aradia quickly turns to Signless, makes some Alternian greeting gesture, and says, “Hello, I’m Aradia Megido.”

“O-oh! Sorry. My mistake,” says the troll with pants hiked up to his armpits. Then, with a frown, he looks past Aradia to the large window that takes up most of Booster’s wall, apparently much more easily distracted than his descendant.

Booster rubs his face again wearily. “Aradia, can you please - ?”

“Are those imperial drones?” Signless interrupts.

“What’s a - ?”

“Yeah, sorry!” Aradia cries, lunging forward to grab Booster. “Explain at Vanishing Point!”

Three minutes later, there is a smoking hole where Booster’s apartment used to be, the rest of the building completely unmarred.

Seven minutes earlier, however, the entire argument repeats before it even originally happened, this time taking place between Aradia, Booster, Signless, Karkat, Dave, The Mayor, and a secondary Aradia at the apartment the next building over.

Somehow, Barry Allen manages to sigh into his cell phone even with a mouth full of sugary energy bar. “Yeah, Canary, I know, but our energy isn’t infinite, and I can’t leave Iris with the twins all day. Maybe if you could narrow the search parameters - ”

Wally West can’t hear what Black Canary is saying to his uncle, but he can guess. Those who have been made part of Rook’s search party are worried sick about him. It had come as such a big surprise. Last Wally’d heard Rook was getting along with Green Arrow pretty well for a foster kid. But hey, running away from Green Arrow is a thing people do sometimes. But to have left his devices and not contacted any of his friends for almost a day…?

“I know,” Barry sighs, leaning his forehead against the door frame of the kitchen. “I know. We’re worried, too. We just need a break. Just… Let us know if there’s more information. I’ll let you know when we’ve restarted - ”

“Barry?!” Iris calls from the living room, sounding more confused and worried than urgent or endangered.

Wally is instantly at her side, while Barry is a few seconds behind him, having been polite enough to say goodbye to Black Canary before hanging up. “What is it?” Barry demands.
Iris stands there in the middle of the living room with a baby on each hip (Don West-Allen on the left, and Dawn West-Allen on the right), apparently having been just about to set them in the playpen when the TV caught her attention. She nods toward it and says, “There’s an alien invasion again. Thought you should know.”

“What the heck?” Wally demands, climbing over the couch to sit directly in front of the television. They watch as big, red, spikey robots destroy one apartment of an expensive as hell building and the whole top floor of the cheaper building next to it. “They’re saying that’s Reach, but Reach would be using beetles for that, wouldn’t they?”

Iris shrugs. “Maybe they switched tactics after Blue Beetle reprogrammed them?”

Barry rolls his eyes. “Or maybe the press saw insects and jumped to a conclusion.”

But Iris shakes her head, “No, that’s Lois Lane reporting. She wouldn’t make that kind of mistake, and she’d have the head of anyone who tried to feed her guesswork.”

“Lois Lane?” Barry asks, surprised. “What’s she doing on television covering a story in Texas?”

Iris shrugs again. “Print’s dying, Barry. The Daily Planet is branching its best reporters out to mass media, and because she’s their star, she usually gets the ‘special’ national headlines. Doesn’t really have the personality for broadcast, if you ask me.”

“Barry?” Wally says, squinting at the screen. “I… I think that’s where the time travelers live, which means that apartment across the street could be Booster Gold.”

“What?” Barry demands. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” says a new voice behind them, and they all three turn to see two teenagers, one boy and one girl, standing at the back of the living room in purple costumes with “T” on the front of each. “So that’s why you should come with us,” says the girl. “Flash Museum is probably safest right now, maybe?”

“Who the heck are you?” Barry demands angrily.

The boy points to Don, and the girl points to Dawn.

Barry groans and runs a hand down his face. “Awe, crap.”

“Called it,” says Iris in a voice that clearly communicates that she is not happy about being right. “I want it on record that I totally called this, and also it’s your fault.”

“What do you mean ‘identification not recognized’?!” Nightwing demands of his phone. He’s on the roof of Las Arañas’ hideout, tapping angrily at the OraNet app when Cyborg comes upstairs to find him. Nightwing turns to him expectantly. “Anything?”

“Well, I’m not sure what all Serket pulled out of her pockets before I got there, but I can tell you that earpiece is fried,” Cyborg tells him. “I won’t be able to get any information off it. Maybe Oracle or Captor can, but I doubt it.” He shrugs helplessly. “So what’s the League say about the identity thing? Everybody’s just kind of… hanging around for instructions.”

“I still haven’t gotten through to them!” Nightwing exclaims, waving his phone to display his frustration. “I think the network’s down or something.”
“What? Hold on,” Cyborg says, and he flips up a panel on his arm. “I… what? I can’t have the wrong login; my login is biometric!”

“Right?” says Nightwing. “Of all times for her to reboot the system or whatever…”

Cyborg grants his friend an extremely dubious look. “Dick, that’s not what…” And then a horrified sort of realization dawns on his face.

“What?” asks Nightwing.

“I… I wasn’t sure if I should say something until we knew more,” Cyborg mumbles, averting his eyes. “But considering… I mean, given the ties… And what Tarantula knew…”

“What?” Nightwing demands again. “Vic, what do you know about this?”

“I… Well, it was fairly obvious,” he says, still not looking directly at Nightwing, “but I was able to confirm… Well, the whole biomechanical interaction had to originate with the hardware, not just the software. Like, you can’t just hack your way through any old Bluetooth right into someone’s brain. Unless you’re Brainiac, in which case none of the rules apply apparently. But, yeah, Tarantula’s Bluetooth earpiece was made specifically to control her.”

“That’s great!” Nightwing exclaims. “That narrows it down a lot, Vic! Who made it?”

“… Wayne Tech.”

For a moment, Nightwing just stands there.

Cyborg steps forward, holding out his hands placatingly like he thinks Nightwing might explode or worse - dissolve. “Dick, that doesn’t necessarily mean - ”

Nightwing shakes his head, shaking himself out of the fog of shock. “No, we have to act as though it does until proven otherwise. We can’t be caught off-guard again. Can Hal hear me right now?”

Cyborg nods. “Yeah, he’s listening through our mics, and I can read his text.”

“Okay, I want Hal and Sollux to shutdown the Oracle Network,” Nightwing orders. “Just because we can’t get in there, doesn’t mean she can’t get at us. Shut down all remote access, fuck up the servers. Ask Vriska for the list of people Tarantula mentioned - she’s got a mind like a steel trap - and warn them any way you can. Phone, messenger, e-mail, messenger pigeon if you have to. What?”

Cyborg has already turned his head slightly away from Nightwing, distracted by something on his eye display. “Imperial Drones are showing up in California and Texas. The Time Players’ apartment and Booster’s apartment have both been destroyed, but future-Megido says they’re okay. The Reach are being blamed by the media, but Hal says these are definitely Imperial Drones. There are already heroes trying to tap Oracle Network for answers. The Watchtower has been shut down.”

Nightwing swears loudly. He paces a moment, thinking, then rounds with, “Okay, so first of all, we need safehouses Oracle doesn’t know about or are too guarded to target, and we can round up non-compromised heroes and their families to those locations. Even if the cave isn’t compromised, it could collapse on us under a hard attack. I think Batwoman’s pretty well fortified, if she’s an option.”

Cyborg nods. “Hal says the Crockers have been preparing for something like this just in case and are well-fortified and off the grid.” He sighs and rubs his neck. “Also… I still own my dad’s house, but I haven’t been there in years. I don’t think Oracle would think of it. It’s not really ‘fortified’ though.”
Nightwing nods. “It’ll have to do. You and Serket head there. I’ll take Kori and Dirk to the manor, see what can be done there before moving on to Batwoman. I haven’t seen Raven since the start of the fight, but it’s usually best to let her follow her instincts.”

Cyborg nods and takes off back to the stairs to head down to where Serket was left with the corpse, while Nightwing swings off the roof to find Starfire and Dirk.

“What? Those aren’t Reach!” Jaime Reyes shouts at the television in the main lounge of Titans Tower in San Francisco.

“Whoa, chill, dude,” says Bart Allen. “Like, I totally believe you and all, but… are you absolutely sure?” he asks, and Jaime immediately shoots him a dirty look. “‘Kay, nevermind.”

“You’d think Lane would know to call us so she could ask you,” Kirin Singh says, frowning at the screen. “Still, doesn’t it strike you as odd that this happened in Texas?”

“What’s going on here?” Beast Boy demands as he enters the commotion-filled room that nearly all of his team has migrated to.

“Alien invasion,” says Supergirl from her seat in the corner, where she apparently could not be distracted from Candy Crush.

Beast Boy scowls. “Right, about that…”

Tim Drake leans in as the camera shows a more detailed view of the destruction. “Shit, Jaime, isn’t that Strider’s place? With the trolls?”

“What?” Jaime turns back to the screen, but only a moment later, the view changes again, and his eyes widen in terror. “That – That’s my parents’ house!”

“Oh god,” says Tim as he realizes that he recognizes the neighborhood. Jaime is already shoving past him and running to the door, blue and black armor spreading over his limbs.

“Hey!” Beast Boy cries, trying to grab for Jaime to stop him, but he’s already out the door and down the hall. When it looks like Tim, Kirin, and Bart are about to follow, he orders, “Sit down! Kara, you can go with him to check on his parents.”

“Are you for real?” Tim demands as Supergirl disappears in a blur of red and blue. Her phone falls to the floor where she dropped it, still playing the background music from Candy Crush.

“The League is already handling this,” says Beast Boy.

“Really?” Bart demands. He gestures to the TV. “Because I don’t see them!”

“Do you see more destroyed cities?” Beast Boy counters. “They are handling it. They’ll let us know if we’re needed.”

“That’s not what Cyborg says,” Ravager tells him as she enters the room behind him.

Beast Boy turns to her, scowling. “What?” he demands.

She shrugs passively. “He says the League is compromised. He’s still on call in the network room, waiting for you.”

“Alright,” Tim says, turning to his team. “So if Jaime and Kara are headed to El Paso, the rest of us
should take Hou - ”

“Absolutely not,” Beast Boy snarls. “I said sit and wait, and you’re going to sit wait.”

“Are you serious?” Tim demands.

“I’m the veteran supervisor for a reason, okay?” Beast Boy counters. “I’ve got experience, so listen to it. Now, I’m going to go talk to Cyborg, but no one acts until I come back with the actual details for a briefing and a good plan. Understand?”

Tim scowls and rolls his eyes toward the window.

“Drake?”

“Fine! Yeah!” Tim shouts exasperatedly. “You’ve made your point. Go talk to Cyborg.”

Beast Boy looks uncertain but soon decides to leave for the network room. Ravager watches him go, then carefully takes the door and shuts it quietly so as not to regain his attention. She turns back to her teammates, who are watching her odd behavior in confusion. “Cyborg’s not still on the line anymore,” she explains quickly. “And it won’t take Beast Boy long to figure that out, so let’s make this fast. Cyborg says those things - ” She points toward the television. “ - are Trollian. Imperial Drones. He says that Tarantula was being brain-controlled and revealed that HIC already knows all of our identities. We should be suspicious of everyone but especially anyone using newer model Wayne Tech earpieces - ” And at this, a horrified Tim, Kirin, and Bart immediately pull out their earpieces. “ - and anyone with animal communication powers or animal affinity.”

All eyes move toward the door behind her. “Animal affinity?” Kirin repeats, swallowing nervously.

Ravager nods. “Anyone she’s controlling with technology will have red lines on their face while the technology is active,” she says. “But the animal lovers don’t. She uses mental control on them. She’s used it on Jade Harley before, and they now suspect she’s recently used it on Rook Sprite.”

Bart shakes his head. “If she has our identities, she has our families. You saw what happened to Jaime’s house! We need to get out of here!”

“Wait,” Tim says, sticking out a hand to stop Bart. He nods to the closed door. “We need to do something about him first.”

“She has all of your identities,” the nails-on-chalkboard voice at the other end of the phone tells Lois. “You, Clark, Kara, and Conner.”

“Oh goodness, that does sound concerning,” Lois says blandly as she shoves more pea mash into baby Jonathan’s mouth. He immediately spits it out again and, squealing, smashes his hands into the mess and starts painting the tray of his high chair with it. “I’ll let him know if I see him.”

“Uh, okay, my point is that you should get out of your house, dumbass,” says the horrid voice.

Lois hears the lock on the front door turn. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that,” she says before hanging up. As Clark enters the house, sounding worried as he calls her name, she quickly pulls her bangs and framing layers closer in on her face. She keeps her head ducked down toward the baby as she answers, “In here, dear!”

Clark is immediately in the doorway of the kitchen, looking around suspiciously. “Hey, I thought we had the sitter today?” he says. He starts turning slowly, his eyes glowing red as he looks through the
walls into the rest of the house and yard.

“Oh, I had to film, and it didn’t take long, so I just came on home,” she answers easily, trying to entice more mush into her son’s mouth.

That got her husband’s attention. “You were on TV again?” he asks. “What’s breaking?”

Lois waves a hand dismissively. “Oh, you know, just Biyalians up to the usual. Nothing the military can’t handle.”

“Oh.” He sounds very confused.

“Something wrong, honey?” she asks, still not looking up from her feeding duty.

“I, uh…” Clark scratches his head, frowning. “Okay, this is going to sound crazy, but a time traveler gave me a note from myself that said I should go home immediately.”

Lois snorted. “Is that all it said?”

“Well…”

“Have you considered that maybe the trolls were just fucking with you?” she asks.

“The… how did you know it was a troll?”

“Well, they’re the new time travelers on the scene, aren’t they?” When she doesn’t get an answer, she looks up at him through her bangs. He’s frowning as he looks toward the kitchen window. “Clark?” she asks. She puts the spoon down to pat Jonathan’s head.

“I… Sorry, I just… I heard your voice on the neighbor’s television.” He frowns at her. “You’re not talking about Biyalia.”

“Is that so?” Lois asks mildly. Her hand trails down baby Jonathan's cheek.

“Why would you lie?”

She sighs and finally looks at him directly, eyes and circuitry shining bright, bright red. “Are you asking because you're in denial or because you're stupid?”

He stares at her in disbelief, and then, at last, his eyes trail down to the hand clasped around his son's throat. Jonathan, uncomfortable, starts to squirm and whine, but Lois doesn't move an inch. "Lois, this isn't you," he says, his voice cracking with desperation.

She rolls her eyes and laughs. "Yeah, obviously."

“Please… stop…”

“Actually, that's a possibility,” she informs him brightly. She nods to the counter, where a new bluetooth earpiece is sat. Same as the one on her ear from which the red circuitry radiates. “Surrender, and you get your son back. It's as simple as that. Let her have what she wants, and we can have what we want. The earth for the heir. What do you say?”

“Lois, please!” he begs.

She rolls her eyes again. “That's not an answer, Clark,” she chides.
“I…” He looks again to his struggling, whining son, whose red face is already preparing for a screaming wail of indignation. And then he looks to the earpiece on the counter. This empress… she really thinks this way? She thinks this is a simple and appealing compromise? The earth for the heir?

“The drones are coming, Clark. You can't take forever.”

He nods solemnly. “Lois, I…” he says quietly. “If you're in there, I hope you understand.” And then he looks to the hand threatening their son again, and he fries it.

Lois screams and pulls back away on instinct as one might from a hot stove. Her husband and son are instantly gone. “Shit.”

Clark doesn't stop til he gets to the arctic, tucking his wailing son into his shirt to keep him warm, still unsure exactly how much Kryptonian fortitude the boy had inherited. As he approaches the hidden door of the Fortress of Solitude, a distant part of him wonders what a screaming baby traveling at Mach 1 sounds like to the people below.

Before he has the door clear of ice (he has to melt it free on every single visit), he hears the snowy PUFF of a rough landing behind him and clutches Jonathan even more tightly as he turns to see Conner Kent approaching him. He shallows tightly. If Conner… he can't fight and carry a baby at the same time. He can't leave Jonathan in the cold. He can't -

“You got Cyborg’s message then?” Conner asks, still approaching, as he clutches that old leather jacket around him against the cold. “I was coming to get you, but then you were already - ”

“What message?” says Clark, trying not to take a step back from Conner’s approach.

Conner stops and blinks in surprise. He looks at baby Jonathan tucked into Clark's button down, at Clark's khakis and loafers, and frowns in confusion. “Um… the troll queen… she knows our identities. She's controlling some of us. With earpieces, mostly, but the animalistic heroes are being psychically controlled.”

Clark swallows hard again. “Then, you'll understand why I'd like to see your face clearly?”

“What? O-oh. Right.” Conner pulls down the collar of his jacket, then pushes his hair back from his face just long enough to show he's not wearing an earpiece or any similar technologies, and then immediately bundles up again. “But if you didn't get Cyborg’s message…”

“She was controlling Lois,” Clark grumbles.


Clark glances to the door and sighs. “Here, come and take him. Put him in your jacket for body heat. I need to get this door open. I don't think he should be out in the arctic weather,” he explains as Conner quickly comes over to obey.

“Man, I shouldn't be out in the arctic weather,” Conner complains as pulls the squirming baby as close as possible, zipping his jacket back up as much as he can. He steps back away from his clonecestors and looks down at his half-brother. “Hey, little dude, you're going to get icicles if you keep that up,” he says, and he wipes away the wetness from Jonathan’s now only whimpering face.

Clark would roll his eyes, but he's using them to heat the door while he tries to push it as much as he can to crack it free of the collected ice. “Yes, Conner, as you are both half-Kryptonian and he is only a baby, and I well remember that you can not stay up here as indefinitely as me or Kara, that was exactly my - Finally!” he cries when the door finally pops loose with a crack. Recognizing his
signature, it immediately starts to retract into some presumably non-frozen door pocket. “Okay, come on!” he says, and Conner is already running past him into the blessed warmth of the inner structure.

Clark is already bringing up the code on the control panel to close the door - Why couldn't it just be a simple button? - when Conner calls, “Uh, Clark, you need to see this.”

“In a second.”

“Now.”

Clark flies down the hallway after Conner and then comes to a full stop the second the inner sanctuary comes into view.

Everything is gone or ruined. Whole control decks have been pulled out. Every single crystal has been shattered or stolen. The hologram projector has been melted. The entire fortress is now nothing more than an elaborate igloo.

“How…” Clark breathes, voice shaking. “Even Lois didn't know exactly where this was!”

Conner turns to him, eyes wide with horror, arms clutched tightly around his brother, his whole body shaking. “Clark… if she knows everything about you… do you think she knows where you're from?”

Clark runs a hand through his hair, still taking in all the damage, and it takes him a moment to process the question. “Everyone knows Superman is from Krypton,” he says.

“No, Clark, I mean Kansas!”

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

“Why is your face weird?” Milagro asks Supergirl, as tactful as ever.

Finally, Supergirl turns her attention back to the Reyeses. “Why is your face weird?” she counters.

“My face isn’t weird!” Milagro objects.

“It’s about to be.”

Like baby Jonathan? Fan of Milagro? See them all grown up in Junior League vol. 1. Junior League is a 4-volume fic series of next gen DC heroes, currently updating once a week. :)
Day of the Drones

Chapter Notes

Yeah, sorry to everyone who was disappointed that Signless and Karkat meeting each other for the first time did not have its own dedicated scene. I'll totally put that scene in the extra chapters eventually (y'all can still leave prompts for that), I've just been concentrating right now on finishing up the main fic and planning out Junior League and making sure that one stays on schedule. But extra chapters that flesh things out a bit more and feature a lot more fluff than drama are definitely still a thing I plan on doing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Good,” says the man in the blood red suit with the burgundy caterpillar on his shoulder. “Because I only have two hands.”

“Wh- Hey!” Bianca and Milagro cry out as the man grabs them by the shoulders and the world blurs around them. Suddenly, they’re standing on the porch of the smoldering ruins of their home, and the man is gone.

“MAMÁ!” Bianca and her daughter turn at the sound of Jaime’s voice, and he’s running up to them, in Blue Beetle costume, from where their kitchen used to be. “MILAGRO!” He sweeps both up in his arms and hugs them tightly. When he finally releases them, he demands. “Oh my god, what happened?”

“I… don’t know,” Bianca admits. She looks around again, as though the drunk man and his pet bug might reappear.

“What’s an imperial drone?” asks Milagro.

“Are you alright?” Supergirl asks, landing next to them. Milagro only gapes up at her in awe. Supergirl’s eyes are red as she scans the area for threats.

“Yes, thank you, Supergirl,” Bianca manages. “There was a man in a suit. He saved us.”

“But he didn’t have a symbol?” asks Jaime, pointing to the Reach emblem on his chest.

Bianca shakes her head. “No, like a three-piece suit, Jaime,” she tells him. “But closely tailored. Like a rich man.”

“Dave?” Jaime guesses, turning to Supergirl, who is looking away, squinting at the neighbors.

“Dave is a boy, not a man,” Supergirl informs him.

Bianca nods. “I don’t know who Dave is, but this man was at least 30. Much older than you.”

“Why is your face weird?” Milagro asks Supergirl, as tactful as ever.

Finally, Supergirl turns her attention back to the Reyeses. “Why is your face weird?” she counters.

“My face isn’t weird!” Milagro objects.
“It’s about to be.”

Thank god for the beetle-induced reflexes that put Jaime and his bug shield that between his sister and Kara’s fist. “Supergirl! What the hell?!” he demands. “What are you doing?!”

“I’m obeying,” she says blandly, and another punch throws him into Bianca and Milagro and back about ten feet. The blow would have crushed his mother and sister under his weight if it weren’t for Khaji-Da activating his jets to slow him down. Jaime, though, feels like his stomach was just punched into his throat.

“Supergirl, stop!” he shouts as she advances again, not sure how long he can stand between her and his family. He’s seen her eyes red like that before, but never dripping wires. She didn’t look like that when they left. … Had she? Jesus, when was the last time he’d looked her in the face? Surely, someone would have noticed? Right? “Kara, please, fight it!”

There’s only a brief moment of the squealing sound of a charge-up before she blasts his shield with heat vision, the heat spreading across the metal and chitin biomechanics that connect him with his beetle, the shield rapidly deteriorates in front of his eyes, and he screams. He screams in agonizing pain, in helpless horror, in sickening fear. “KARA!”

And then a big troll smacks her in the back of the head, and she stops. She doesn’t fall over, doesn’t even react. She just stops, standing frozen exactly as she was.

“You need to hurry toward Star City,” says a voice behind them, and they all three shout in surprise and turn to the newcomer, Jaime raising his cannon to defend them. The man ignores him. The man who is definitely Older Dave In A Suit. “That’s where your father and friends are headed. Don’t talk to anyone who talks to animals or is an animal. Don’t stop and talk to trolls. Don’t use Wayne Tech. Don’t trust anyone with red eyes.” Then he hesitates, considers, and adds, “… who isn’t a time player.”

“Maid of Time got a lot scarier,” Milagro observes, staring at the big troll.

“Handmaid, actually,” Older Dave corrects. “And, technically, she’s a witch. I’m serious about you guys hurrying. I don’t know how long - ”

“I’LL KILL YOU!” Supergirl rages just before Handmaid smacks her in the head again with her golden, jewel-encrusted baton. Again, Supergirl immediately freezes.

Jaime eyes Supergirl warily, and then shakes his head. “Wait, what about talking to animals? What’s that about?”

Older Dave rolls his eyes. “She can control animals. You have to go toward Star City now!”

“But Beast Boy - ”

Suddenly, Older Dave grabs Jaime’s face to make him focus, and Jaime just barely prevents Khaji-Da from shooting him. “Jaime Reyes, I am from the future, and if you don’t preserve this goddamn loop, we’ll all die, and I really don’t like it when that happens. Your friends are handling their own piece of this. They’ll be fine. But I need you to go toward Star City. Just… toward. You’re not actually going to get there. Getting there isn’t the point.”

“How do you know my name?” Jaime demands. “My beetle says you’re not just Dave from the future. He says you’re the wrong Dave. Like a clone.”

Older Dave smirks. “Exactly like a clone, actually. And I know it because I’m from the future. Now,
TT: Did you know your porn business server is also hosting a very popular film?
PP: im sorry the dude youre lookin for is mad busy not bein here how can i help
TT: Dave?
PP: not presently
TT: … RiLal
PP: oops
PP: and you are
TT: Hal / AutoResponder / Dirk Strider
PP:
PP: crap i didnt mean to like not send anything thats weird
PP: um
PP: shit im an idiot
TT: Look, I don’t know why you’ve chosen not to talk to us. I mean, I can guess. But there’s another reason for me contacting you when you obviously prefer privacy.
PP: man no i dont
PP: i am just very drunk right now
PP: and i just thought it could wait until you know
PP: until i was less drunk
PP: and like had some explanations under my belt for like bein a dumbass etc
TT: … You’re drunk right now?
PP: i am drunk usually tbh
TT: Okay.
TT: I
TT: Look, we don’t have time for this.
PP: technically i got all the timez
PP: well if i take my d w me
TT: What?
TT: Okay, waiting until you sobered up was maybe a good idea of yours. But like I said, we don’t have time. Or I don’t. You seem to be implying you have time powers. That’s useful.
TT: Because the Batterwitch is making her move.
PP: what
PP: no
PP: no no no
PP: that was the other universe the one i died in
TT: It seems she has universe-jumping powers. which explains how she even got to yours/ours from the universe belonging to other you & me.
PP: i cant deal with this again
TT: If you don’t, she is going to kill you.
TT: Again.
TT: And I don’t know about you, but I’d consider it a shame if I didn’t at least get to meet you first this time.
PP: right
PP: right okay
PP: moving
PP: bye

- - pyreticPuppeteer [PP] ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT] - -
TT: So I talked to him.
TT: What the hell? I thought we agreed not to act on what we know since he very clearly does not want us to.
TT: Yeah, but that was before parts of Texas started getting blown up.
TT: We don’t have any reason to think she knows where he is.
TT: We don’t have any reason to think she doesn’t know where he is.
TT: Fine.
TT: How did he take the news?
TT: As well as can be expected. He’s now activated.
TT: Also, I have good news.
TT: What?
TT: It seems you don’t have to be nearly so scared of what he may think of you, as it turns out that being an utter fucking disaster runs in the family.
TT: What are you talking about?
TT: Apparently the reason he hasn’t approached us is because he hasn’t been sober since he got here.
TT: … shit
TT: Don’t worry about it for now.
TT: Don’t worry?
TT: I have an entire subroutine running dedicated entirely to worrying about it so that you don’t have to.
TT: Focus on the job at hand.
TT: Fine.
TT: Update me immediately if anything develops.
TT: Sure.

Beast Boy watches as Imperial Drones descend from the sky to encapsulate Titans Tower. Beside him, the Titans (sans Kara and Jaime, who have not yet returned) watch, grave in expression and silent. They’ll be mad at him for keeping them from fighting.

They won’t be mad for long.

“Look, it’s a simple matter,” he says, reaching for justification. “Just stand down now. Let them come in. Let them think we’re showing our bellies. And… while they’re distracted… the League will handle it.”

Tim, Red Robin, turns to him with a dour expression. “Sir…”

“I know, you don’t like it, but - ”

“There’s just something I have to say.”

Beast Boy sighs heavily and turns to face him fully, preparing for a fight. “Yes, Red Robin?”

Tim’s eyes slide toward the windows, then back to Beast Boy. He, too, sighs, looking defeated. “I just wanted to let you know… We wanted to let you know,” he says, gesturing to his grim companions, who nod in assent, “that we respect you. And we’ve been honored to serve next to you. Even though we don’t always agree on everything, we have learned so much from your experience.
We don’t just consider you an instructor and supervisor, we consider you a leader and a friend.”

Beast Boy can’t keep the small smile at that from playing at the edges of his lips. “Thank you, Red Robin,” he says. “I appreciate that.”

Tim nods. “So, I want you to know… I want you to have faith… That we will come back for you.”


When Tim doesn’t respond, Beast Boy reaches out to clasp his shoulder. His hand goes right through the hologram. And Tim Drake, Kirin Singh, Bart Allen, Rose Wilson, M’gann M’orzz, Cassie Sandsmark, and John Egbert all disappear, having never been there in the first place.

“GO!”

Connor Hawke jumps straight out of his computer chair in shock, then proceeds to trip over it and fall to the floor, smacking his face on the floor. “Ow,” he groans.

The stranger grabs at his arms, hurriedly trying to pull him up. “Come on! You haven’t got time!”

Connor lets himself be pulled to his feet and shoved, stumbling out of his bedroom door. He turns as he falls against the wall hallway, and sees a boy his own age, dark-skinned with bleached hair, wearing a red outfit with a hood and cape and a gear symbol on the front as well as wearing a pair of aviator sunglasses. The boy is carrying a sword. “Who - ”

The boy grabs him again and shoves him forward. “GO!” he shouts. “GO! GO! HURRY!”

“What are you - ?” Connor struggles. “Why - ?”

“CONNOR?!” his frightened mother screams from the living room. Suddenly Connor finds his motivation to move, and he runs toward her voice.

“MOM?!” he shouts, and he enters the living room to find her backed away from… that hero alien. The one from TV. She’s black-shelled with big ram’s horns and wears an outfit similar to the boy’s. Matching symbol and colors. “Wh-what’s going on?” he demands.

“We’re from another timeline,” Maid of Time explains, opening the front door for them. “They came here to kill you. We don’t know why they did, but we know it’s important that they don’t succeed!”

The boy enters, looks around, then grabs up Sandra Hawke’s purse and keys, and shoves them at her. “Head to Star City,” he says, and he pulls her outside toward her car, Connor hurrying after them.

“Wh- Star City?” Sandra demands. She looks to Connor in confusion, but he has no idea what this is about either. Aside from a couple school trips, he’s never even been to Star City.

“You have to find - ” The boy’s sentence is interrupted by the blood spurting from his mouth. He looks down at the bright red serrated spear jutting from his chest. He drops his sword. And then the spear yanks him back and up, harpoon being reeled in by something huge and red and spiky. Sandra screams. Connor freezes, feeling at once like he’s going to throw up, scream, and collapse from panic.

“FIND DINAH LANCE!” Maid of Time screams, and then she’s flying up into the air after her partner.
Sandra Hawke’s hesitation lasts only a split second. The split second that it takes for her to realize that she only has one chance to save her son. She runs around the car, pulls open his door, and shoves him inside. Then she runs back to the driver’s side, just as one of those things lands on her house, and she shoves the key in the ignition, and peels the car out of the drive with a piercing screech, and then she drives away from the scene with the conviction that their lives depend on it.

“This is Lois Lane for Daily Planet International Video reporting on the ongoing Reach disaster. Not only have clips arisen of Supergirl fighting her Reach-empowered teammate Blue Beetle - now known to be El Paso local Jaime Reyes - at his own home as he attempts to target his own family for destruction, but now we have video showing that Titans Tower in San Francisco has been destroyed by these new Red Beetles. Rumor is that Titans veteran Beast Boy was the only one to survive.”

Iris West-Allen gasps in horror at the television screen, clutching her twins tighter where she sits on an old lumpy couch in the unused Justice League base beneath the Flash Museum. “But they wouldn’t know immediately, right?” she says, looking up at her husband, who is scowling at the screen, flanked by the worried future duplicates of their twins. “I mean if he ran too fast, he’d be away from the scene before anyone knew if he survived or not?”

“If who survived?” Bart Allen asks as he skids to a stop in front of them. Then, “Wait… Dad?”

It takes Don a second to realize Bart means him. “Me?” he says, pointing to himself.

Dawn rolls her eyes. “No, Don, obviously ‘Dad’ refers to me.”

“Well, I don’t know!” he objects. “I’m not from our future! I don’t know my kids or what changes you might undergo!”

Dawn rolls her eyes at him, then turns to a bewildered Bart. “Him or me?” she asks.

“Oh… him?” says Bart, pointing to Don. “You’re… my aunt Dawn. I think.”

“Told you,” Dawn says and smacks her brother in the shoulder, who objects with a loud “Ow!” and pouts exaggeratedly at her.

Bart looks between everyone, takes a deep breath, then starts listing questions off on his fingers, “One, why are Dad and Aunt Dawn here? Two, why are all of you here instead of at the house I have been looking all over for you did you know there’s an alien invasion?!” Gasp. “Three, who are we concerned about surviving what and why didn’t we save them? Four, why does everybody think this is the Reach? Five, has anyone heard from the League.” Gasp. “Six, where is Wally? Seven - ”

“Hold on a second!” Barry interrupts, grabbing the remote from Iris and turning off the TV. “You have to actually give us time to answer, and have you considered that we might have questions of our own for you?”

“No, I did not,” Bart answers honestly.

Barry sighs, goes over the list in his head, then decides, “Twins, why don’t you take the first one?”

Dawn shrugs, looking a little sheepish. “Well, Dave Strider and Maid of Time grabbed us from the future and took us to Vanishing Point because they’d seen us at Vanishing Point, but when we got there, we saw your potential futures, and decided to intercept by getting you to leave the house and then staying with you. So… Yeah, we didn’t actually stay for the full explanation.”

“What’s Vanishing Point?” asks Bart, Barry, and Iris.
“I think it’s a time traveler secret they don’t normally let us know about,” says Don with a tone of disapproval. “Time travelers are so snotty about the whole cosmic treadmill thing.”

Iris frowns up at her husband. “They get that from you, too,” she informs them.

“The cosmic treadmill?” he says. “Can’t imagine where else they’d get it from.”

She rolls her eyes. “No, Barry, jumping the gun before they’ve heard all the information.”

“Well, we’ll probably know soon enough!” Dawn objects, gesturing to Bart.

“Nuh-uh!” Bart cries. “I asked first! You answer my questions, and then I answer yours.”

“Okay, number two was… why are we here and did we know about the alien invasion?” says Barry. “They just answered the why. As for the second part, sort of.” He sends Iris a meaningful glance.

She leans forward compassionately and tells Bart, “Honey, the news says the Reach blew your tower up.”

“What?” Bart demands.

“They said only Beast Boy survived.”

“Yeah, ‘cuz he was the only one in it!” Bart exclaims. He throws up his hands and starts pacing rapid circles. “I can’t believe they blew it up and told everyone we were dead! Oh my god, what jerks! Excuse my language. And those aren’t even Reach! Jaime said so!”

“They said Jaime attacked his family,” Barry points out.

“What? He would never!”

“If he lost control to his beetle - ”

“The beetle would never! It likes him!” Bart tears at his hair, then rebounds and answers, “Look, think about it, okay, if the Reach ever came back here after being kicked once, that would be a violation of their treaty, and it would mean war with Blue Head Planet, okay?”

“Invaders can be petty,” Barry points out.

“Over one planet?” Bart demands. “Grandma, what’s that super small country? Begins with L?”

“I told you to stop calling me that, and I think you mean Liechtenstein,” says Iris.

“Right,” says Bart, “so if Russia was like ‘Hey, Liechtenstein has some nifty resources, let’s go steal them,’ and the U.S. was like ‘Nuh-uh, if you mess with Liechtenstein, we’ll nuke you,’ and Russia’s like ‘if you nuke us, we’ll nuke you,’ and the the U.S. is like ‘then I guess you better not mess with Liechtenstein’, do you really think Russia would consider it worth invading tiny little Liechtenstein? Whatever it’s got in it, it’s still a really small amount compared to other places they could be invading instead. All the space heroes say that when it comes to the galactic stage, we are totally a Liechtenstein.”

Iris looks to Barry. “He’s got a point.”

“So who is invading?” asks Don.

“Wow, it is so weird getting questions from you,” says Bart before answering, “I’m not sure it
actually is an invasion? Look, Cyborg called the Tower and told Ravager that Nightwing found out from Tarantula that Betty Crocker has all of our secret identities” Gasp. “and then Cyborg found out that Tarantula was being controlled with a Wayne Tech ear thingy, and then the Oracle Network went down and” Gasp. “it uses Wayne Tech, so they’ve started warning everybody to go hide in places off-network because they decided that Crocker must be making her move, and they said not to trust anyone” Gasp. “using ear pieces or with animal affinity because she can control them, and then Beast Boy was acting really weird, so Tim put up holograms of us, and everyone went to Star City because it’s the nearest base, and then I came out here to find you guys, and where is Wally?”

GAAASP.

“He’s looking for the rest of the League while we lay low,” Barry tells him.

“If Nightwing thinks bases on the Network are compromised, should we be in the Flash Museum?” asks Don. “It’s… kind of public.”

Barry frowns at the blank television. “I think we should wait for news from Wally.”

Still suited, Nightwing and Starfire had to enter the manor through the Batcave, but Dirk was able to race in through the front door. Pushing himself to his limits when he was, admittedly, not a speedster did, however, meant that this left him a little winded by the time he finds Cassandra with Damian and Alfred in the larger study that is often used as a classroom. Damian boredly deigns to allow Alfred to teach him exponential multiplication while Cassandra appears to bodily buried in *War and Peace*.

Alfred raises a pointed eyebrow at Dirk. “Did you this time keep it to the ’ugly’ carpets?” he teases.

“Leave,” Dirk growls through gasped breaths.

“Excuse me, young man?”

“You all need to leave!” he says, straightening up. “The Condesce. She’s here. She knows everything.”

“Tt, we already know about her,” Damian says, rolling his eyes as he continues working out his math problem.

Dirk slams his hands on the desk. Coolly, Damian puts down his pencil, sits back with crossed arms, and glares at him, and Dirk snarls, “Not. That. She knows who you are. She knows who he is. She knows about this place. She is in Wayne Enterprises Technology Branch. She has been ahead of us this entire time, simply waiting for the best time to murder us all.”

Before Damian can react, they’re interrupted by Alfred’s “Miss Cassandra, it isn’t time for - ”, and Dirk turns around just in time to see an antique sword slicing down directly in front of his face and the grey hand that appears with the sound of a pipe organ squealing in agony to grab the blade before it hits him in the neck.

Dirk is bent awkwardly backward over Damian’s desk as everyone stands frozen. Alfred by the chalkboard, looking terrified but also like he’s trying to solve a puzzle. Damian standing back from the desk with his chair fallen behind him, evaluating the scene, his options, his available weapons, and the strategies he might utilize. Cassandra with her bright, bright red eyes and face full of circuitry still holding the sword clasped in Damara’s hand as burgundy blood drips slowly down along the blade edge.

Damara turns to Dirk and, without moving her hand from the blade, decapthalogues his decapitated head into his lap, and suddenly, everyone is in motion again. Dirk flips backward over the desk
while Cassandra pulls her sword out of Damara’s grip and Damian dodges out of Dirk’s way. Alfred immediately finds this room’s hidden alarm, then grabs Dirk and hauls him out of the room as Damara lays into Cassandra with some kind of magic time blast which seems to slow down their fight. Damian fights the urge to contribute to the fight and instead chases after Dirk and Alfred as they head down to the Batcave.

Unfortunately, Nightwing, Starfire, and Batman are running up from the Batcave. Catching sight of them, Nightwing shouts, “It’s not Bruce; it’s Spoiler!”

“She’s not the only one!” Damian counters as the two groups come to a stop by each other.

“Of course, it’s the girls,” Dirk groans, and he could kick himself.

Somewhere in the distance, that pipe organ clang sounds again. “What was that?” Batman demands. Dirk frowns and tells him, “I’m pretty sure that’s the sound of Damara deciding this fight is boring and leaving us to fend off Cassandra on our own.”

“There’s stairs this way,” Alfred says, pushing past the costumed heroes. “If Cassandra is coming from this level and Spoiler is coming from below, I advise we travel up.”

“Isn’t that the biggest mistake in a horror movie?” Nightwing demands, hurrying to follow him nonetheless.

“Horror movies don’t feature your girlfriend, your mentee, or the Bat-Plane,” Alfred tells him.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

Dr. Hawkins appears from the kitchen, where voices are talking quietly (Virgil’s sister, Sharon, and someone unfamiliar). “Hey, boys, why don’t you come into the kitchen and say hello to our guest from the Wayne Foundation?” he says. He makes a beckoning gesture as he turns back into the kitchen.
Evening of the Drones

Chapter Notes

This is another one with a large enough memo that if you're not reading on the AO3 page with the work skin turned on, things could get confusing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Where are we going?” Flash (the third one; used to be Kid Flash until his predecessor decided to stay home with the kids) asks Black Canary as he obediently follows her through the narrow cave passage, carefully shining his flashlight over her head to light the way. Roxy and Calliope were still out scouring the city for Rook as well as stranded heroes.

“If the Oracle Network is compromised, we’re going to need bases off-network. Places hard to get to that aren’t known to the League as a whole,” she explains. “Green Arrow used this place in his early days, back when he was trying to be Batman. Eventually, he took the more convenient route of remodeling his house under the guise of eccentricity. When his house blew up, he became more nomadic - this was around the time Roy joined your Titans - so he didn’t really need a base. I mean, he did buy another house, he just rarely stayed in it. Anyway, on the occasions that he did need a base, we sometimes used this place, which is why I have a key.”

She stops at a fork and considers. “... But not a map.” She turns back to Flash. “Think you could scout ahead?”

He shrugs. “Sure, I guess? I still don’t think I understand what we’re looking for.”

“A door, definitely,” she tells him. “But at the very least, something that doesn’t naturally occur in caves. That will at least put us in the right direction.”

He nods and salutes. “Be right back!”

He disappears in a blur and so does the light, but Canary is far too well-trained to be scared from just standing around in the dark of an area she had seen lit only a moment ago. She is not, however, well-trained in patience. As Flash’s flashlight strobos past her again, she pulls out her phone and checks pesterchum.

- - sonicBoom [SB] is no longer an idle chum! - -

- - sonicBoom [SB] has automatically joined Trollian memo INVITE ONLY ABSOLUTELY FOR SURE CONFIRMED NOT-CONTROLLED - -

SB: news?
TG: no one has rook yet but green arrow is following the lead of bros natural instincts which is apparently a thing

- - turntechGodhead [TG] joined the memo in ??????????? hours from now - -

FTG: yeah its called bein a creep
FTG: time team is in the process of assembling but to decomplicate matters were absconding from pesterchum just wanted to warn you before going quiet
FTG: laterz
- turntechGodhead [TG] left the memo in ???????????? hours from now - -

CG: DID YOU JUST *BREAK* TROLLIAN?!
TA: the code indicate2 he wa2 me22agiing from out2iide tiime
CG: YOU CAN DO THAT?
TA: ye2 obviou2ly 2eeiing a2 how he did
SB: roxy plz continue dropping the mad knowledge on me
TG: right!
TG: so yeah callie an ive found some peeps though and are ready to move them to your location when you uh find your location
TG: apparently some of the time peeps have been directing others to star city so i guess thats confirmation that your idea works?
SB: good to know
SB: who have you found?
UU: several members of the titans - red robin, miss martian, ravager, and john
UU: er, i mean heir of breath

“Hey, I think I found it,” says Flash, appearing again next to her. “Unless someone else has a secret base down here, which, y’know, possible.” He points to her phone. “What’s up?”

“Roxy and Calliope found some of the Titans,” she informs him. “Give me a minute.”

SB: well, it’s a relief to know they did not die when the tower was destroyed, but that’s not all of the titans
SB: are the others accounted for?
TG: beast boy and supergirl are compromised kid flash and solstice and wonder girl have gone to retrieve their families

Black Canary swears under her breath.

SB: supergirl? you’re sure?
TG: she tried to kill blue beetle so yeah pretty sure
TG: like tv is blaming him but tv also says this is reach when we all know it isnt so hes probably more likely a fall guy instead of a culprit

Flash, who had been snooping over Canary’s shoulder, snatches the phone from her and types

SB: Tried? How in the heck did he escape her?

“Don’t you have your own phone?” Black Canary demands.

“No service down here,” he tells her. “How does yours work?”

She shrugs. “I sleep with a very rich man,” she tells him.

Flash opens his mouth to speak, then, very wisely, shuts it again.

CG: WE’RE NOT SURE. NO ONE’S SEEN HIM OR HIS FAMILY YET. THE CLIPS ON TV ARE BRIEF AND UNCLEAR. ALL WE KNOW IS THAT THE KILL IS UNCONFIRMED AND SUPERGIRL IS NO LONGER IN EL PASO. WE THINK SHE’S HEADED NORTH AGAIN.
TT: Here are the running totals:
TT: Unlocated or Out Of Contact: Batwoman (Bats on it; Gotham), Blue Beetle (last detected in El
Paso), Flash II (last detected in Keystone City), Flash III (last detected in Keystone City), Kanaya Maryam (last detected in Gotham), Kid Flash (last detected in San Francisco), Raven (last detected in Gotham), Red Hood (last detected in Cincinatti), Rook Sprite (unknown), Rose Lalonde (last detected in Gotham), Solstice (last detected in San Francisco), Static (Arsenal on it; Dakota City), Superboy (last detected in Metropolis), Superman (last detected in Metropolis), Terezi Pyrope (last detected in San Francisco), Wondergirl (last detected in San Francisco), Wonder Woman (Themyscira), whoever the fuck “Connor Hawke” is
TT: Located and confirmed free: f!Aradia Megido (Chicago), Arsenal (traveling east), Batman (Gotham), Black Canary (Star City), Booster Gold (Chicago), Bro Strider (Dallas), Cyborg (NYC), Green Arrow (traveling east), Jade Harley (Metropolis), Jake English (traveling southwest), Jane Crocker (Metropolis), John Egbert (Star City), Karkat Vantas (Chicago), Miss Martian (Star City), Nightwing (Gotham), Ravager (Star City), Red Robin (Star City), Robin (Gotham), Sollux Captor (Chicago), Starfire (Gotham), the Mayor (Chicago), Vriska Serket (NYC)
TT: Confirmed compromised: Cassandra Cain - Batgirl (last seen in Gotham); Garfield Logan - Beast Boy (last seen in San Francisco); Lois Lane - herself (last seen in Metropolis); Stephanie Brown - Spoiler (last seen in Gotham);
TT: Unconfirmed as compromised but highly suspected: Oracle (last seen in Gotham); Supergirl (last seen in El Paso)
TT: Confirmed injured: none
TT: Confirmed dead: 1 alt-Aradia & 1 alt-Dave in Napa, California - reason for being in Napa unknown
TT: Time Travelers So Who The Fuck Knows: Aradia Megido, Damara Megido, Dave Strider, alpha!Dave, Rip Hunter
GG: There are so many people who aren’t on that list. All four lanterns. The Question. Hawkman & Hawkgirl. Dr. Mid-Nite. Martian Manhunter. Et cetera. These are people who weren’t specifically named by Tarantula or directly connected to those who were, but if you are in contact with them and can give us any information, please post it.
GG: Still locating those not in contact! I had Superman and Superboy in the arctic for a while, but then they moved. Quickly. I’m trying my best to update as quickly as possible when I find people, but I need somewhere to put them when I do!
GG: Stone House in NYC is available. Crocker House in Met has minimum availability. Working on Gotham location. Need western locations.
SB: Oop! This is actually Flash III, using Black Canary’s phone. I mean, she’s hear too. But yeah, I am located. Def not controlled. The Tornado Twins came and warned me and Flash II and uh, his wife. That’s awkward. Anyway, they’re holded up in Keystone while I went to find help - Black Canary - probably Kid Flash has found them by now.
TT: Okay, not really going to take the “probably” there, but I can update your status. Also who the fuck are the Tornado Twins? They’re not in my files, and I’ve got more files than Oracle.
SB: Oh right, so like, you know how Flash II retired cuz of babies? In about 15 years, they’re going to be The Tornado Twins.
TT: Updating files. Please let us know when you actually open your location.

“Wow, testy,” Flash says, handing Black Canary her phone back.
Black Canary returns the phone to her pocket and heads down the way Flash had indicated.
“Everyone’s stressed, Flash,” she reminds him.

“Yeah, but, like, isn’t Red Dirk actually a computer program?” he asks.

“Apparently, he is an encoded soul.”

“What is that?”
“I have no idea,” she lies, not wanting to bother explaining.

They walk in silence for a while, Flash occasionally correcting her direction, until at last they reach
the huge, heavy blast door. Black Canary removes the aging security card from her wallet and
shoves it into a hidden seam. The door beeps and then begins rolling out of the way. Black Canary
and Flash step through into a dark cavern, his puny flashlight only able to light the railing directly in
front of them.

“Uh, light switch?” asks Flash.

She scowls. “It’s supposed to come on automatically.”

Flash sweeps the flashlight back and forth several times, finally locating a keypad. He sticks
Canary’s card into it (It’s a good thing he decided to be a superhero, because he’d make a brilliant
pickpocket.), and then begins quickly pressing all the buttons.

Black Canary scowls again. “Every time you start doing that, I feel like you’re going to break it,” she
confesses.

“Hey, trust me, okay? That rarely happens.”

“What do you mean - ” But they’re interrupted when the cavern lights finally begin to blink on one
by one.

Flash gulps as he takes in all the collapsed hardware and small piles of rock. “So… they found this
place after all?”

Canary shakes her head and begins to make her way down the stairs toward the main area. “Nah,
that’s just water damage,” she tells him. She makes a sweeping gesture to the large cavern. “This
grand palace, Flash, is what happens when Green Arrow decides he has missed his calling as a
construction contractor.” She turns to him with a sweet smile. “And guess who gets to help me make
it livable?”

“Ma?!” Clark calls as he enters his childhood home, a farmhouse in Smallville, Kansas that still
doesn’t have locks on the doors. “Are you home?!?”

“Clark?” his aging mother calls from the area of the kitchen. Behind him, Conner steps inside the
house, baby Jonathan still tucked in his jacket and now asleep, and then shuts the door behind them.
Soon, Martha Kent appears in the hall doorway, drying her hands on a tea towel and frowning up at
her son. “You didn’t tell me you were coming. Has something happened? Tsk, Conner, dear, that’s
not how you hold a baby.” She’s already pushing past her son to take Jonathan from his brother.

“You haven’t seen the news?” asks Clark.

Martha pauses and sends a guilty frown toward the television set. “Oh, I don’t…” She wrings her
hands. “It just makes me feel so paranoid these days, Clark. I worry enough already.” She glances up
at him again. “Why? Has something happened?”

Before he can answer, the phone rings, and Martha sighs. “Hold that thought,” she says, turning
toward the aging house phone screwed into the wall. She’s taken by surprise when Clark grabs her
arm to stop her. “Clark?”

“I…” He licks his lips as he considers, looking a little frantic. “If it’s Lois… we’re not here. You
haven’t seen us or heard from us, okay?”
Martha raises a concerned eyebrow. The phone rings again. “You… want me to tell your wife… that I don’t know where you are?”

“That’s… It’s not actually Lois,” he says. “Something… something bad is happening. That’s why we’re here. Please, Ma, trust me.”

“Of course, I do, dear,” she says, putting her hand over his. And she does, but that doesn’t stop the worry. The phone rings again, and Clark hesitantly releases her, and she goes to answer it. Nervously, she picks up the receiver, and asks, “Hello?” A pause, a deep sigh of relief, and then, “No, sorry, I’m not interested,” she says and hangs up.

Clark rolls his eyes to the ceiling and collapses back onto his mother’s lumpy couch with loud 70s floral pattern. Snickering, Conner sits next to him and hands over the baby. Martha makes her way back to the main area and falls into a newer model Lay-Z-Boy across from them. “Alright, now that that’s over, what is this about Lois? What’s happened?”

Clark glances to Conner. “You’re the one that got the message from Cyborg,” he says. “What exactly did he say?”

“Um, okay,” Conner starts uncertainly. “So you haven’t been watching the TV, so, like, do you know about the trolls? The new aliens? Maid of Time?”

“There are aliens made of time?” asks Martha, not sure she’s keeping up.

Clark can’t help but laugh. “No, Ma, there’s a new heroine who is called ‘Maid of Time’. M-a-i-d. Like a cleaning lady or a milkmaid.”

“What’s a milkmaid?” asks Conner, who is immediately shushed.

“Alright, and Maid of Time is an alien?” asks Martha.

Clark nods. “She came here with several others like her. The last of their kind.”

“Sounds familiar,” Martha muses.

“Right, and they’re called trolls. They’re from the planet Alternia. And, like he said, they were supposed to be the last ones,” Conner explains. “Because, in this timeline, their planet never existed in the first place. They were escaping from a really horrible society lead by a murderous empress. So, traveling to another reality, they thought they would be safe. But she did the same thing.”

Martha glowers and rolls her eyes. “And now the evil queen of the trolls wants to come here and make trolltopia on earth?”

Conner, surprisingly, shakes his head. “No,” he says. “I mean… she isn’t coming. She’s already here.”

“Well, yes, I was being a bit - ”

“She was here before them,” he tells her, and he finally looks her in the eye, and she’s taken aback by how frightened he looks. How fragile. “Before the refugees. We don’t know how long, but she moved fast… Took over Crocker Corp and moved it toward tech. That’s how… Their bluetooth receivers are the fastest yet, so Wayne Tech used them in a new headset model, and that’s how Lois got her brain controlled. And, before her, Tarantula. I don’t know who else.”

“But it wasn’t random chance,” Clark tells his mother. “She chose Lois on purpose. She knows, Ma,
who I am. She knows most of us. Has known for a while. She just kept us thinking we were ahead of her while she made her preparations.”

Martha clutches her stomach, feeling ill. “Preparations for what?” she asks.

She nearly jumps when the phone rings again. She groans, excuses herself, and goes to answer once more. This time, Clark listens in.

“Hello?” Martha asks, voice a bit shaky.

“Hi Miss Kent this is Jade Harley you don’t know me I guess I should have said Miss Witch oh my god stupid! That’s not the point! The point is YOU HAVE TO RUN! RIGHT NOW! R-!”

There’s a bright flash and a sizzle of heat above Clark’s back as he just barely managed to push his mother to the ground before a laser cuts the first floor of her house right across the middle. In his arm, carefully held to avoid whiplash or crushing, Jonathan stirs and starts to sniffle.

Conner is already next to them as Clark pulls his mother to her feet. He shoves them both toward the door. “Run!” he orders. “Go! Go!”

Conner quickly pulls Martha up into his arms, knowing she won’t be able to run on her bad hip, and jets through the door, Clark on their heels. As soon as they’re outdoors, another laser grazes Conner’s leg, and he screams in pain. Clark turns on their assailant as flies up level to him, red eyes blazing with circuits that radiate out from a bluetooth earpiece. “Kara?” he gasps.

The hesitation was a mistake.

Kara grabs him, twists, and throws him back to earth, and it’s all he can do to protect Jonathan, barely able to skid to a stop. He glances up desperately to Conner, but Conner can’t carry Martha and the baby safely. And neither of them can carry someone and fight. At least... not with fists.

Already ahead of him, Conner blows a stream of icy air to freeze her, but the second she feels the chill at her back, Kara turns and blows him away with a whirlwind. Clark blasts her from the back with his heat vision, and she screams and twists in a roundhouse axe-kick, and the only thing he can do before the kick lands is turn over and try to protect the baby.

The crack of his spine breaking isn’t nearly as loud as his scream. The baby is crying. He doesn’t know how long he can hold on. If he simply flies away, she’ll chase him and Jonathan or Conner and Martha. Neither of them can hold her off on their own while protecting another.

Heat blasts into his back. He has seconds to figure out how to save them all.

“HEY, SUPERGIRL!”

Kara pauses her assault to look up just in time for John Egbert dive in out of nowhere and plant his feet in her chest. She stumbles back, then makes a grab at him. Soon, he disappears and a whirlwind erupts around her. She shrieks in fury.

Hands pull at Clark’s shoulder. “Come on,” says a soft voice. “We have to go! Hurry!”

“Jonathan…” he says as he tries to pull himself up, but his knees fail to give him any leverage.

“Ssh, it’s okay.” It’s Roxy. Roxy carefully easing him onto his side and pulling the wailing Jonathan up into her arms. She smiles at him weakly. “Everything is - ”
There’s a circular blast of heat vision, John cries out and falls to the ground briefly before disappearing into whisps of smoke just before she can stomp on him. Angry, she turns to Clark and growls, “WHERE ARE YOU?!”

Confused, Clark looks to Roxy, crouched next to him. She still has one hand on his shoulder and the other arm cradling the baby. The screaming, crying baby.

“I can hear you!” Supergirl taunts. She steps closer and closer. “You think your little magic trick can save you?” She begins to blast the area again, and Clark pulls Roxy down under him.

John reemerges again behind her with the biggest hammer Clark has ever seen outside of Gotham and brings it down hard, bashing Supergirl into the ground.

“NOW!” Roxy urges. “We’re going!” She takes Clark under the shoulder and blasts into the air, leaving the Kent farm behind as fast as possible. Not as fast as Clark could, though. In fact, her flight stability is pretty wobbly.

“But the Heir of Breath!” Clark protests.

“He can handle it!” she tells him. “Can you fly on your own?”

Clark answers by pulling away from her.

“Awesome!” she says with an exhausted grin. “Here, take the baby so I can text. I already told Conner to take Granny to Stone House in New York. That’s where we’re headed.”

As soon as Clark has Jonathan secure, Roxy has her phone out, typing into pesterchum. Her flight pattern gets more erratic. “Oh is that what we’re doing without Oracle?” he asks. She merely nods, rubbing at tired eyes. He extends a hand to her. “Here! Grab on to me! I can fly faster than you, and you need the rest!”

Roxy nods, captchalogues her phone, and takes his hand. Then promptly loses her grip and falls.

“ROXY!”

When Virgil Hawkins and Richie Foley reach the Hawkins house, they're surprised to find an unfamiliar car in the driveway. “Who's visiting?” asks Richie.

“No idea,” Virgil admits. “But it looks like Dad's home, so I guess it's a friend of his.”

Richie glances in the driver's side window because he's a shameless snoop and makes a noise of surprise. “Huh, it's got those hand-pedal things used by people with, like, foot disabilities,” he says.

Virgil snorts and teases his friend, “Foot disabilities?”

“You know what I mean!” Richie blushes and shoulders his best friend roughly, and Virgil laughs and unlocks the front door.

“Dad, we're home!” Virgil calls out as he closes the door behind Richie. Richie's been spending his days at Virgil’s house for so long and so often that it's entirely unnecessary to explain who “we” is.

Dr. Hawkins appears from the kitchen, where voices are talking quietly (Virgil’s sister - Sharon - and someone unfamiliar). “Hey, boys, why don't you come into the kitchen and say hello to our guest from the Wayne Foundation?” he says. He makes a beckoning gesture as he turns back into the kitchen.
Huh, weird. It's very rare for grant managers to visit Dr. Hawkins at home, and the Wayne Foundation has never visited Dakota as far as Virgil is aware. Virgil follows his Dad to the kitchen with Richie on his heels, and he finds there a white woman with long red hair and fashionable glasses in her late 20s sitting in a wheelchair. She smiles brightly at them, rolls forward, and extends her hand to shake Virgil's. “Hi, you must be Virgil!” she says. “I'm Barbara Gordon. And you're Richard Foley, aren't you?”

Richie shakes her hand as well, and probably wouldn't have thought anything of it except that he catches Dr. Hawkins frowning in confusion. He had not, apparently, mentioned Richie to this woman. “Uh, I guess?” Richie flounders. “I mean, yes, I am but-”

She's already ignoring him, pulling some device out of a side pouch on her chair. “Tell me, boys, do you know what this is?”

Richie swallows, his mouth going dry. A glance around the room tells him that Virgil and Sharon still have not caught on that something is very, very wrong, and Dr. Hawkins still just looks confused. “It's an EMP, ma'am.”

“That it is,” Ms. Gordon agrees. She presses the button on the device, and suddenly the house goes dark and quiet. The heating system, the fridge, the lights, everything goes out. While Dr. Hawkins jumps in surprise and Sharon swears loudly, Richie can't help the squeak of despair that escapes him, knowing what the device has probably done to the entire contents of his backpack. Virgil grabs him by the wrist, pulling slightly as though ready to get between them, and it seems that he has finally realized that there is a villain in his house.

“Why are you doing this?” Virgil demands.

“Targeting you or using an EMP to do so?” Ms. Gordon asks sincerely. “I guess it would help to be a bit more thorough in my self-introduction. As I said, I'm Barbara Gordon, daughter of Gotham City Commissioner James Gordon, and when I was your age, I called myself Batgirl, just as you now call yourself Static and…” She makes a vague gesture at Richie. “Whatever your name is. I forget.”

Sharon barks out a laugh of disbelief. “Lady, you are crazy!” she objects as Dr. Hawkins insists that a mistake has been made.

“Oh, I assure you, there has been no mistake,” Barbara tells them. “See, I'm not Batgirl anymore, obviously. I'm Oracle.” This garners and even higher-pitched squeak of despair from Richie. “I built the greatest data collection network on this planet and became so obsessed with having the best hacking tools that I even utilized Brainiac technology to interface directly, which is what made it so damn easy for Her Imperious Condescension to worm her way into my brain and take control.”

It's then that Virgil Hawkins decides the best thing to do would be to kick Ms. Gordon in the face and take off running with Richie, Dr. Hawkins, and Sharon. Unfortunately, what actually happens is that Barbara smacks his ankle aside with an escrima stick so hard that Virgil cries out in pain and falls to the floor, where she grabs him by the hair and forces him to look up at her. His eyes widen in horror as he sees through the kitchen window that giant red monsters are floating down onto his lawn. “Let me explain this to you Virgil,” she tells him. “You and your boyfriend can either forfeit your lives to the drones outside and then maybe The Condesce will let your family live a little while longer, or you can keep resisting and everyone you know and love will fall to ash with the rest of this city.”

Virgil takes a deep breath, forces himself to relax, to slump his shoulders, buying himself precious seconds.
“Virgil, you can't!” Richie objects.

“You're making a mistake!” Dr. Hawkins insists.

“Virgil, what the hell have you done?!” Sharon demands.

Ms. Gordon smirks and releases Virgil’s hair with a small laugh. “I should probably tell you that you're doing the right thing, but to be honest, it's just the less bad thing. Our whole species is doomed.”

With one more deep, centering breath, Virgil’s plan is crisp and clear, and he looks up at the corrupted Oracle with pure defiance. “No,” he says.

And then the room explodes with electrical discharge.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

Kanaya, Rose, and Karkat exchange confused glances. “Is… Is a future version of your brother walking around with a troll grub on his shoulder?” Kanaya asks.
Hey, so usually when I'm trying to push through and finish up a series, I tend to do a lot of updates really fast, as you may have noticed me updating every couple days. But... tbh, I haven't felt quite as creative lately, and also I'm waiting for MP (who is sick and also working on Voltron fic) to help me with a Flash scene (as I am really only passingly familiar with Flash Family). So I'm gonna take a short break with more occasional updates, though I wouldn't really consider it a "hiatus."

If you get bored waiting, try sending me some prompts for side chapters :P

-- Additional note: Again, I do not have my Spanish proofreader because I'm having trouble with Slack. If anyone is speaking unnaturally, feel free to inform me in the comments.

-- Additional additional note: Haha, oops, the previous chapter mentioned a thing that hasn't happened yet. Um, sorry for the spoiler. This is what happens when you write sections out of order. I'll probably edit... eventually???

When the biggest cricket that Booster has ever seen skitters across the top of the burnt shell of the computer monitor, the Mayor quickly grabs it up and stuffs it in his mouth. Booster isn’t sure whether to be relieved or disgusted.

Karkat hisses in distaste as another water droplet lands on his head. No matter where he migrates to in this room (Booster refuses to let them go exploring the rest of the house.), the leaky roof will always find him. He demands, “Remind me why, of all the available locations, we’re holed up in this dilapidated shack?”

“Because we’re waiting,” says Booster. He stands against the wall by the door, propping it up with his shoulders (and for all he knows, it may actually need the help), turning the darkened bronze key over and over in his hand while he tries desperately to keep his cool. Nearby, the Mayor nearly knocks a keyboard over onto the napping Sollux as he continues his hunt for green items, and Booster warns, “Hey, try not to wake him, okay? He’s pissy with the headache.”

“Well, how much longer?” Karkat whines. He picks at the moldy carpet with his toe claws just for something to occupy his attention.

“Do I look like Aradia?” Booster snaps. “Do you remember her giving a timeframe before disappearing? Why don’t you ask your boyfriend?”

“He isn’t answering the memo anymore,” Karkat grumbles sullenly. Ah, so that’s why he’s acting like a four-year-old; he’s worried.

Signless butts Karkat’s shoulder with his own from where he’s sat right smack dab next to his descendant and asks, “What’s a boyfriend?”
“Huh?” says Karkat, blinking up at him that owlish way he has since they met, as though still surprised to find Signless there next to him. “Oh, uh, it’s a human word for, like, matesprit? But, like, vaguer.”

There’s a flash of chiming, and future!Aradia reappears near Booster again. She looks around, then asks, “It’s still just you?”

Booster glowers at her. “Did you just skip forward over the boring waiting part?” he demands.

“Yeah, of course!” she chirps.

“And you didn’t take me with you?”

Aradia snorts. “Oh please, if anyone went unwatched in this house for five seconds, you’d suffer painful failure of the blood pusher,” she teases.

Signless looks skeptically at the room they’re in, clearly once a residence but then abandoned and left such for years. “You… care about this place?”

Booster shoves his key back in his pocket. “No,” he lies.

There’s a crackle of green energy as Rose and Kanaya are dropped smack in the middle of the room. Rose wears her godtier outfit, and Kanaya is carrying some sort of white creature the size of a medium dog. It seems vaguely caterpillar-like? Maybe maggot-like?

“Is that the mothergrub?” asks Booster, trying and failing to keep the disgust out of his voice.

Kanaya quickly captchalogues the animal, blushing vibrant green as she lies, “No.”

Signless stands from his position on the floor, Karkat quickly scrambling up after him, and extends a hand to her. “Excuse me,” he says, “you must be Kanaya Maryam. I’ve… been informed of you.”

Kanaya turns to him with surprise and, if anything, her blush deepens. “O-oh! You must be Signless!” she says. “I - Yes, hello!” She quickly shakes his hand, then frowns down at it, feeling the gesture somehow inappropriate. So, after only the briefest of hesitations, she uses his hand to pull him roughly into an enthusiastic hug, and now he’s the one blushing.

Rose grins at them from the sidelines and remarks, “As touching as this moment is, I do think we should leave the middle of the room clear for landings, as Jade is still in the process of distributing everyone.”

“Oh, yes, of course!” Kanaya says, pulling Signless to the side of the room and then abandoning him to hug Karkat and tell him that she’s glad he’s okay.

Soon, there’s another crackle of green energy and Alberto Reyes, Brenda del Vecchio, and Paco are dumped unceremoniously on the floor. Brenda is the first to react by screeching “Gross! It’s wet!” and scrambling to her feet, shooting a dirty look at the carpet. Booster hurries to Alberto’s side and helps him up. He looks around for the man’s cane and then realizes that Jade must have forgotten to send it with him.

Almost as soon as he turns to Alberto to apologize, Rose decaptchalogues what looks like a gnarled old branch off a probably haunted tree. “Will this do?” she asks, holding it out to him.

Alberto blinks in surprise, then takes the branch in confusion. Carefully, he tests it out, and apparently it’s sturdier than it looks. “Apparently so, thank you,” he says.
“You just happened to have that on you?” Booster asks.

Rose shrugs. “It seemed fortuitous to take it.”

Alberto is giving Booster a confused sideways look. “Uh, Mr. Gold? Your… arm?”

“What about it?” Booster asks tersely.

“Um, guys?” Paco says with an edge of panic to his voice. And Booster turns to him to see that he and Brenda have finally noticed the trolls.

Before anyone can try to explain the matter, Rose steps forward and curtseys to the three newcomers. “Hello, my name is Rose Lalonde, I am human, and my title is ‘Seer of Light,’” she says. “Please allow me to introduce my cohorts. Kanaya Maryam, Alternian troll and Sylph of Space,” she says gesturing to her girlfriend.

Kanaya repeats Rose’s bow. “My pleasure to meet you,” she says. Booster isn’t sure if she’s serious or just following along with Rose’s theatrics because bewilderment outweighs hostility.

Rose continues around the room like that, next announcing, “Aradia Megido, Alternian troll and Maid of Time.” (“Hi!” chirps Aradia, waving enthusiastically.) “Karkat Vantas, Alternian troll, and Knight of Blood.” (Karkat gives a shy grunt of acknowledgement.) “Signless, Alternian troll, and Seer of Blood.” (Signless fidgets a moment before attempting to mimic Rose’s bow as well.)

Rose pauses, then decapcthalogues a ball of violet yarn and smacks Sollux with it, waking him up so abruptly that he bangs his head on the desk. “Ow! What?!” he demands.

Rose smirks, turns back to the other humans, and announces, “And that is Sollux Captor, Alternian troll, and Mage of Doom.” (“Fuck you,” says Sollux.) And, at last, she turns to gesture to the carapacian who has bundled himself into a far corner of the room since the new people arrived. “And this is the Mayor of Can Town.”

There is a long silence in the room, finally broken by Brenda declaring, “None of that explains anything!” She turns to Booster and demands, “Who the hell are these people? What happened to Jaime?! How did we get zapped out of a moving car?” (“Hey, yeah! What happened to my car?” Paco demands.) “And why, of all places, were we taken to a rat-infested hell-hole?!”

“Hey!” Booster objects.

They’re interrupted when the green energy starts up again, and Rose quickly starts shooing people out of the center of the room. Soon, Blue Beetle, Bianca Reyes, and Milagro Reyes are dropped into the room. Bianca has an almost entirely identical reaction to Brenda’s. Jaime, however, immediately lowers his helmet, and runs to hug his dad. “¡Papá, dios mío! ¡Estás bien! ¿Estás bien?”

Relieved to tears, Alberto grips his son tightly. “Sí sí, estoy bien,” he assures his son. “Estoy bien.”

“Mrs. Reyes, what happened?!” Bianca demands.

“We saw your house blow up!” Paco adds, helpful as ever.

“Supergirl attacked us!” Bianca tells them, throwing up her hands in disgust.

“What?” Alberto demands, pulling away from his son.

Jaime nods. “It’s crazy! There are all these big red aliens landing and targeting heroes, and the TV
says it’s the Reach, but it’s not! I swear! And then when I see our house on TV, I go to make sure you guys are okay, and it’s just Mom and Milagro - Where’s Milagro?” Jaime turns around frantically, to see that Milagro is still sitting on the floor, staring up at Aradia like she's trying to figure something out. “Ookay, that’s the quietest she’s ever been,” he decides. He shakes his head and returns to the topic at hand, “And then Supergirl tries to kill Milagro, and then she tries to kill all of us. Then, Old Dave shows up with Skinny Aradia and they freeze her in time and tell us to go toward Star City but not to it because we’re not actually needed in Star City, we just need to be traveling? So I take Mom and Milagro and fly. And then, after a while, we’re suddenly here.”

“This ‘Old Dave’ - he wears a suit?” asks Alberto.

“Yeah,” says Jaime. “Bright red three-piece suit.”

“He showed up for us, too!” says Paco. “Told us to head toward Star City. He was with someone who looked a lot like her.” He points to Aradia.

“But wasn’t me?” asks Aradia.

Paco looks confused by this. “Wouldn’t you know?”

“He had a giant bug on his shoulder!” Milagro adds.

Rose’s eyebrows go up. “Giant bug?”

“Yeah, like a huge caterpillar!” Milagro adds. “It was dark red and had like a face and curly horns like hers!”

Kanaya, Rose, and Karkat exchange confused glances. “Is… Is a future version of your brother walking around with a troll grub on his shoulder?” Kanaya asks.

Rose shrugs. “Sounds like it?” she says. “I mean, that makes absolutely no sense, but… it’s Dave. So… in a way, that alone seems to concisely explain the matter.”

“Have you ever concisely explained anything?” Booster asks. He

“Did I not just?” Rose asks with faux innocence. “But on the matter of explanations, I do believe we have ignored Miss…?” She gestures to Brenda apologetically but with the obvious implication that some introductions have been lacking.

Brenda blinks in surprise. “Oh, uh, Brenda. This is Paco, Mr. Reyes, Mrs. Reyes, Milagro, and, um, Blue Beetle,” she answers, gesturing around to the individuals named.

Rose nods politely. “And for those who have missed it, I am Rose Lalonde, and my companions are Kanaya Maryam, Aradia Megido, Karkat Vantas, Signless, Sollux Captor, the Mayor, and I assume you know Booster Gold,” she says, also gesturing to her named individuals. “Now, Brenda, I believe your questions were - and correct me if I’m wrong - ‘Who the hell are these people?, ‘What happened to Jaime?, ‘How did we get zapped out of a moving car?’ which has the twin question from Paco of what happened to his car, and, at last, ‘Why, of all places, were we taken to a rat-infested hell-hole?’”

Brenda blushes vibrantly. “I, uh, I was scared, okay?”

“No judgements here,” Rose says with a smirk. “As for the first question, as it came after introductions, I suppose you are asking our relationship to Jaime and the matter at hand, rather than our identities. We - ”
“Oh my god, this is going to take forever,” Booster complains. “They’re all aliens. She’s human, though as far as her origin story goes, she might as well be an alien. All of them have some kind of supernatural ability, though only Aradia and Sollux are high-powered. We’re being attacked by friends and Imperial Drones alike because their evil alien queen decided to take us over.”

Kanaya hangs her head guiltily. “We are the few survivors of our planet, and refugees from her reign,” she explains. “So… I brought with me a mothergrub, the means of resurrecting our race. I - I didn’t mean anything hostile by it! I just… wanted to ensure that we didn’t die out completely. But… I’m afraid since she now knows that I have it, she aims not to dominate humanity as she has attempted before, but instead to erase it and resurrect troll kind on top of the remains.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Signless says.

All eyes turn toward him. “You don’t think so?” says Booster.

He shakes his head. “No, see, she’s not a queen, she’s an empress. A conqueror.” He gestures to Karkat’s open crabtop still on the floor nearby. “According to the memo and national news, only a hive stem in San Francisco, two hiveblocks in two neighboring communal hive stems in Houston, the hive belonging to the Reyes family in El Paso, another single hiveblock in a communal hive stem in Dallas, and three lone hives in Tuba City, Dakota, and Napa have actually been destroyed. The only fights that have occurred were between Supergirl and Blue Beetle, Supergirl and Superman, Tarantula and Nightwing’s team, Batgirl and Damara, and Spoiler and Batman’s team. And all of it is being blamed on these ‘Reach.’ The drones are present across many cities but have not yet caused much destruction.” He looks around the room, where still no one seems to understand what’s unusual about that. “That is extremely mild for her. If she wanted to destroy your species, it would be gone already.”

“So you think it’s not her?” asks Booster.

“Well, I can guarantee you, it’s not the Reach,” says Jaime.

Rose shoots Jaime a worried look but is interrupted by Signless continuing, “No, it must be. Unless there are other seatrolls here, she is the only one who can produce Imperial Drones, much less control them. As well, Hal has verified that the earpiece technology used to control Tarantula, Mrs. Lane, Supergirl, Batgirl, and Spoiler is the same as appeared in Ms. Crocker’s tiaratop. But I am certain that while inevitably all her schemes do end in conquest, she must be playing at something else right now. I think she means to distract you heroes. From what, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean she ‘produces’ drones?” Sollux asks, suddenly caring about the conversation at hand. “Do you know how the hell she brought those with her? I doubt she can fit all of them in her sylladex. She sure as hell didn’t have them with her in the last world, or on Rose’s earth, but Roxy says there were on her earth. How the hell has she been able to produce out of nowhere?”

“Oh-oh!” Kanaya realizes. She starts glowing out of surprise. She turns to a confused Signless and tells him, “I think, perhaps, the subject of drones and seatrolls may only be in the jade-blood schoolfeeds, which you would have been taught by your mother.”

Signless considers this, then shrugs. “I suppose I can see why she’d want to control this information.” He turns back to Sollux and answers, “Trolls didn’t always have a mothergrub. Evolving to require the involvement of another species in one’s reproductive cycle is quite uncommon. However, due to the genetic diversity offered by this developed quirk, it quickly dominated our evolution until we largely lost the means to reproduce on our own. However, seatrolls still have the vestigial ovipositor, and their eggs are most viable in fuschia-bloods. An adult fuschia-blood - an empress, obviously - can still lay unfertilized troll eggs. These eggs become drones.
Drones can also lay their own unfertilized eggs, still encoded for the empress’s control. With that sort of exponential reproduction and as fast as drones develop, in the time she’s been here, she could have easily created over a million.”

Paco makes a face of disgust and declares, “I never want to hear about this ever again, and I didn’t even catch half of that.”

Booster runs his hand down his exhausted face. “Look, we can discuss that all after settling in?” he asks. “This is everyone Jade’s sending to us, right? Obviously, we can’t stay up here, but I think the basement ought to be fine. It’s built to withstand an apocalypse; I think it can hold up against a little rain.”

“Actually, there is one more thing that needs to be explained,” Rose says quietly, glancing to Jaime with an expression he can’t decipher. “Jaime, about the Reach…”

“Look, it’s not them,” he insists. “I know that sounds defensive, but I have Reach technology literally embedded into my spine, okay? I would know Reach if I saw it. Or… the beetle would, anyway.”

“I know,” Rose assures him. “That is rather the point. Mrs. Lane under the direction of the empress has claimed that not only are the drones new Reach technology, but that it is you who leads them, now controlled by your beetle.”

Jaime looks horrified. “I - He would never! He’s my friend!”

“Yes, I know,” Rose assures again. “We all know. And we trust you. But Jaime, that’s not all…”

“What more could there be?” Jaime says with a bitter, disbelieving laugh.

“Under the excuse that you are an enemy and that citizens need the ability to defend themselves from you,” Rose explains as gently as possible, “Mrs. Lane has released your identity on national television. It’s not just the empress who knows who you are; it’s the whole country.”

Jaime stares at her. “I think I’m going to throw up,” he mumbles as his mother pulls him close against her, rubbing his back to comfort him as much as she can through the beetle’s protective armor.

Booster scowls at the floor. “We’ll handle it,” he promises. “You folks… We’ll make sure you’re safe, okay? After all of this… But for now, let’s just… Let’s get to the basement, try to settle in for the night.” He claps Jaime on the shoulder in an attempt to reassure him.

Jaime turns to him, finally really looking at him, and “Booster, where’s your other hand?”

Booster sighs exasperatedly. “Gee, y’know what, I must’ve lost it in the couch cushions again,” he all but snarls. “Basement is this way.”

With no more disagreement or distraction, Booster leads the way down an adjoining hall. Wanting to be left alone to process all of this new information, Jaime drops behind the rest of the group, lagging behind in the hall. He looks around, and it again strikes him that this isn’t just an abandoned building. It’s an abandoned home. There’s still picture frames on the wall. Family photos. Group photos. News articles.

All, he realizes, with some very familiar faces. Was this place Booster’s? But why was it rotting? Why did he abandon it?

“Jaime!” Booster shouts from the end of the hall. A hidden panel in the far wall has been pulled back
to reveal a steel door. There’s a computer panel on the front of it. “Get over here!”

Jaime pushes back through the group to get next to Booster. “Why, what do you need?” he asks.

“Give me your hand,” Booster tells him. Then, “No, without the glove.” Jaime concentrates on getting the beetle to remove the suit from his hand, exposing Jaime’s own flesh, and holds his hand out to Booster again. Booster then grabs Jaime’s hand and pushes it against the screen. He then starts tapping through options at the side. “Keep it there a sec… Okay, you can take it back.”

“What are you doing?” Jaime asks as the shell covers over his hand again. He doesn’t really need his armor right now, but it makes his beetle feel better.

“Coding you into the security system so you can get in here without me if needed.”

“Me? But why?”

Instead of answering, Booster pushes open the door and leads the way down shiny steel stairs. Jaime follows at his heels, and everyone else behind him follows after, and he does hear someone shut the door behind them. The stairs are kind of long for your typical basement, but this seems to be some kind of superhero bunker, so maybe that’s to be expected. Soon, Booster opens the next door at the end of the stairs, and they walk into a space that is absolutely nothing like the rotting house above.

It’s huge, for one. There are garage doors at one end which means it’s even bigger. It’s also filled with technology Jaime can’t even begin to put a name to. Everything from a wall that resembles an 80s supercomputer to a small team of assembly robots to what looks like an entire corner of medical equipment as well as several servers, screens and keyboards scattered everywhere. It’s the supremely cluttered heaven of a tech junky with an unlimited budget.

And then, finally, Jaime understands.

“Welcome to the Beetle Cave,” Booster grumbles as everyone piles in. “I think I know where some cots and blankets and stuff are stored, so I’ll go get that. Don’t touch anything.”

“I can’t believe you have Goodnight, Moon memorized,” Ollie snickers as they walk up the eleven million stairs to the police precinct.

“How could I not?” Roy demands. “It’s the only thing she’ll let me read her. I can't choose another book. I can't skip a night. I can't change the words. Just a loyal read through of Goodnight, Moon every single night for months.”

Ollie laughs at that. “Grandpa doesn't take turns with you?”

“He says it's always my turn,” Roy complains. A guy carrying a bunch of gear accidentally bumps into him on the way down the steps and grunts an apology. “Apparently, I did the same thing with Frog Brings Rain.”

“Didn't you have a band cal-?”

“Hey, wait a sec!” Roy suddenly turns on his heels and hurries down the next several steps, calling out, “Strider!”

The man who had bumped into him stops, turns, and groans in realization. “Ser’ly, man?” he demands, setting his gear down on the steps.
“Don't start with me,” Ollie growls as he heads back down the stairs after Roy and Bro. “We were told that you were charged with dealing.”

“Yeah, charged doesn't mean I fuckin' did it,” Bro snaps back.

Roy slows to a stop in front of Bro as he finally gets a good look at him. “Dude, what happened to your face?”

Bro glowers up at him. “Apparentlly, I tripped an’ fell into a cop car,” he says in a bitter tone.

“'Apparentlly’?” Ollie asks.

“Shut up, Oliver,” says Roy. Then, to Bro, “So what happened with the drug charges?”

“I'm sorry, you are?” Bro demands irritably.

“As of 12:30 today, I am your son's social worker,” answers Roy.

Bro glances skeptically to Ollie. “Rook?” he asks, and Ollie nods. Bro turns back to Roy, looks him over (a man who wears a big silver cuff bracelet with aqua stones in it for a watch is either very secure in his masculinity or is very sheltered), and then says, “Prove it.”

Roy just rolls his eyes. “Well, I don't carry my credentials on me, so I guess I'll just wait here while you Google ‘Roy Harper social work’.”

Bro rolls his eyes right back but does fetch out his phone, grumbling about only having 7% battery due to it having been left on for 24 hours. Scrolling through his Google results, he says, “You have lead a colorful life, Mr. Harper.”

“You don't know the half of it,” Roy assures him. “See enough to believe me?”

Bro continues fiddling with his phone and nods. “‘Arligh’, fine, Mom. I was DJing at Chilli’s when some kid asks me for dope, which happens pretty much every job because if anyone's gonna have weed, it’s prob’ly the DJ right? Not like I gotta try t’ make sure I get hired a second time or anythin’. Anyway, I tell him no. Then he asks if I've got anythin’ else. That doesn't happen nearly as often, but I handle it the same way I always do: I sell him a baby asp’rin for twenty bucks because drunk people are stupid an’ loose wi’ their money. Turns out, he was a baby-faced cop. He took the suggestion that he was dumb enough to buy asp’rin very personally an’ tried very hard to prove that wa’n’t the case. Unfortunately for him, the lab results came back like twenty or thirty minutes ago. Salicylic acid an’ cornstarch.”

Roy blinks at him. “I don't know whether to be mad or impressed,” he admits.

“I don't actually care about your feelings, man,” Bro growls. He shoves his phone back into his pocket and turns his full attention back on Ollie. “My turn to ask questions. Why did you call me thirty times at nine in the morning, why is Rook’s newly acquired social worker a drug counselor, and where the fuck is Rook?”

Bro’s attempt at intimidation is somewhat ruined by Roy’s phone going off. Roy checks the screen and frowns. “Ol, mind handling this yourself?” he asks, already turning away and walking down to the bottom of the steps as he answers his phone.

Ollie watches him go and then turns back to Bro, who is glowering down at him expectantly. Ollie hates when taller people make him feel short, so he steps back onto a higher stair. He scowls back for a moment, then looks away and admits, “Rook ran away. We haven’t been able to locate him.”
“Are you fuckin’ serious right now?” Bro demands. “How badly did you have to fuck up? He never ran away from me.”

“A little less judgement from the guy that considered murdering him on a regular basis?” Ollie counters.

“Maybe I did, but at least I never lost him.”

Ollie rolls his eyes. “Please. Did he ever even leave your presence without you watching him?”


Ollie considers this new information. Considers it in the light of knowing that Dirk Strider is Prince of Heart and that, as far as the kids have been aware, their adult selves had at least some of the same abilities. “Are you telling me you could sense him?”

“Can,” says Bro. He shrugs again. “Always thought it was a Cal thing, but they say Cal’s not here, so… Whatever.”

“You can sense both Dave and Rook right now?”

“Dave’s been out of range most of the day, I’m gonna guess doin’ time shit,” Bro says easily. “Rook… I can just tell he’s alive. He’s too far away to get a better sense than that.”

“Can you tell if he’s closer or further than he was when he was in Star - ?”

“Ollie, we have to go!” Roy shouts, suddenly next to ex-mentor and pulling him by the wrist back down the stairs toward where they’d parked the car around the corner.

“Wait, what? What’s going on?” Ollie demands, scrambling not to trip. He’s surprised when he realizes Bro has decided to follow them.

“We've been compromised!” Roy says, and Ollie doesn't remember the last time he heard his former sidekick so panicked. “Peixes knew all along! She knows who we are! And now she's making her move. Oh God, I-”

Ollie pulls back on Roy's arm. “Roy, hold on!”

“Don't you get it?” Roy demands, rounding on him. He grabs Ollie by the collar, forcing him to face him. “She is making her move, and I am twelve hours away from my family.”

Calmly, Ollie puts his hands on Roy's to ease them off his collar. “Which is why I wanted to point out that calling them is faster.”

Roy blinks, the releases Ollie. “Right.” He pulls out his phone and starts dialing. Meanwhile, Ollie looks around for Bro, but finds that Bro has passed them down the street and around the corner, where he can hear Bro’s drawling tones conversing with someone.

Ollie rounds the corner to see what's developed with Bro, and then, “Uh, Roy?” he calls. “You should come over here.”

“BUSY!” Roy snaps back at him.

“Now!” says Ollie.
Angrily, Roy rounds the corner and then stops, shocked. “I… What?”

“DADDY! DADDY! WE TIME TRAVELED!” Lian shrieks in delight as she runs up from where she'd been standing next to Brave Bow to hug her father's legs. Beside Brave Bow, Bro is bickering with a blonde-haired, brown-skinned woman sipping a drink out of a martini glass while leaning against a parked car.

“I-” Roy takes turns gawking at his daughter and gawking at the phone still in his hand. “Then who am I talking to?”

Ollie glances at the phone. “It appears you're talking to no one. You've been hung up on.”

“Yeah, I think after Roy called, he immediately got distracted by something,” Brave Bow informs them. “Then Drunk and Drunker showed up at the door, and I had to hang up.”

Roy finally picks his daughter up, supporting her on his hip while he clutches her tightly. “You're okay, though?” he asks her. “What happened?”

“The weird man and the lady—” She points to the blonde woman who is currently frowning at her empty glass in disapproval, “-and their pet bug came to the door and told Grampa that we had to go back in time to leave before the things show up!” she tells him. “And I don't think Grampa believed them. He said mean things at them.”

Brave Bow rolls his eyes. “Two drunken idiots, one wearing a huge caterpillar on his shoulder, show up and tell you they need to save you from 'Imperial Drones' by taking you back in time… I think most people would be rude.”

“I'm 'fraid I must protest the description of idiocy,” the woman slurs with the mannerisms of a drunk who thinks they're being quite clever. “It seems that I have not yet medicated myself to the point of quite curing the affliction of intelligence.”

Brave Bow emphatically gestures to her with the conviction that she has just proved his point. “Unfortunately, when said drones did show up, we had no choice but to believe them. Drunk took the four of us back to just after you left with Queen, then disappeared. Drunker stayed with us - apparently as an escort, though I have no idea what use she was supposed to be - as we drove after you to Dallas, arriving now.”

“Well, about half an hour before now, technically,” says the woman that Brave Bow has deemed “Drunker.” “Drunk” must thus be Lian’s “weird man.” The woman has produced a gin bottle from somewhere, but it, too, is empty. She holds it out to Bro expectantly, but he simply ignores her.

“I'm sorry, who are you?” Roy demands of her.

The bottle and glass disappear with the slight-of-hand flourish that Roy has learned denotes captchalogueing an item, and she then shoves her hand toward him with the stumbling suddenness of someone who is completely fucking wasted. “Dawn Strider,” she introduces herself.

Roy doesn't have a spare hand, due to the way he's clutching his daughter, so he nods at her awkwardly. “Roy Harper,” he says.

“I was under the impression we got the whole story on your lot,” says Ollie. “But I've never heard of Dawn Strider.”

“You told me I had to change my name because two Roses was confusing,” she explains. “Will tell.” She waves a hand in what is probably meant to be a dismissive gesture but nearly hits Bro in the
“You're the Rose from Dirk and Roxy’s iteration,” Roy realizes. “You… you came back in time to before you were brought back? And didn't tell anyone… except Bro, I'm guessing, by his apparent familiarity with you, but… why?” He scowls as he looks her over. “And why are you wasted?”

Dawn snorts and giggles at him. “Oh, I haven't been sober in… What day is it?” she asks. Before he can answer, she waves it off. “Nevermind, that won't help. We'll ask Rich when we see him again. Point is, by now you must realize the troubles our dear children are in with first the blendable claspects, and now the trolls beginning to mix identities with their alter-selves. It won't be long until the beta players succumb as well. So, the time players decided to create a buffer by skipping backward as far as they safely could. Dave would not blend with Rich, Rose would not blend with me, Aradia would not blend with Damara and D.”

“D. is the Handmaid, isn't she?” asks Ollie, and Dawn nods. “But you aren't a time player.”

Dawn merely shrugs. “I'm afraid Rich and I are far too codependent to be separated for long. It's the unavoidable conclusion of being literally the only soldiers on the field of rebellion, fighting inevitability for well over a decade until succumbing to our own foreseen homicides within seconds of each other.” She starts to take a swig out of the bottle that has reappeared in her hand only to be reminded again that it is empty. “It would have been better, perhaps, to bring Roxanne, Jacob, and Janet, but the non-godtier time players simply don't have the power level for so many hitchers on the bigger jumps, hence the need for D. and Rich to partner up.”

“Wait, is the Handmaid the giant caterpillar?” Ollie asks, desperately trying to keep all this nonsense in order.

“Sometimes,” says Bro. “You know that sword of Dave's, switches between whole and broken?”

“No?” says Ollie.

“Well, it's like that.”

“Okay, nevermind that,” says Roy. “Nightwing says we've been compromised. That Condesce knows everything. But we still haven't found Rook.”

Dawn nods. “Rook will be recovered,” she says, though the glance to her empty glass is an obvious tell that the situation is not fine. “Bro will aid Mr. Queen in locating him. However, you and your family need to head to the Crocker house in Metropolis, which has already been fortified in case of attack. First, though, you will need to head to the city of Dakota to pick up Static, his friend, and his family. I suggest selling your vehicle, which can be tracked, for an older model that seats seven.”

“Static?” Roy says. “He's not even League. He's a teenage C-lister who hasn't had anything to do with the players. Why would she target him?”

Dawn shrugs. “Because she can? It's what will happen Roy, and the longer you argue about this, the longer he's going to have to fight Oracle on his own.”

“Ora-?” Roy feels like he's going to throw up. “Oracle was the one compromised??”

“That's impossible!” Ollie objects. “She would never sell us out! Under any circumstance!”

“She didn't,” says Dawn. “She's being controlled. Now, get moving.” She turns on her heel to apparently head off on some other mission.
“And where are you going?” Bro demands, obviously irritated. Seems he's starting to feel things again.

She waves her empty gin bottle back over her shoulder at him. “Liquor store, obviously!”

Roy scowls at her retreating back. “Wow, you weren't kidding,” he mutters to his grandfather.

“Well, she says we're on Rook duty, so do you have any idea where to head first?” Bro asks Ollie.

Ollie hates to admit it, but, “You said you've never been able to lose track of Dave. You have like some kind of supernatural Dave compass. Can you tell where Rook is now?”

Bro immediately points west. “That way.”

Ollie shrugs. “Then, that's where we're headed.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

Bro’s face continues not to change, but he leans back into his seat once more. “We’re not exactly headed straight toward him, but it’s the best we can do without off-roading,” he says. Something in his tone changes slightly when he adds, “But he’s… getting further away.”

Ollie’s hands tighten on the wheel. “They’re moving him?”

“No, he’s still in the same place, he’s just… less there…”
Diana pulls her sword out of the body of the… red thing. Only a few remain on the island of Themyscira, quickly disposed of by the Amazon warriors that call the island home. The island is supposed to be a safe haven for their culture, a second chance for those who suffered greatly at man’s hand in their first life, and for the drowned children brought to the island by the nereids. Only a few times has the outer world of man interacted with it. Never have space aliens been a problem. After all, if man has yet to notice their one small island, why would the rest of the galaxy? You had to know the island was here to come to it. Or… crash land your airplane. Still…

“You’re sure this isn’t a man’s machine?” Diana's mother, Hippolyta, asks. She frowns down at one of the corpses uncertainly. She then frowns even deeper as she looks out to sea.

Only a few dozen of these things came to the island, testing the strengths of the warriors. Several thousand, however, surround the island. Waiting.

“I’m not sure it’s machine,” Diana answers with honesty. She crouches next to the thing, puts her sword aside, and pulls out her dagger. She pries away the red plating on its chest, but from that angle, the thin organic armor easily breaks. Diana frowns, thinks of the autopsies she’s seen performed by police, military, and even occasionally Leaguers. She decides to cut away the sinews attaching it to the form instead.

It’s… It’s not like any meat she’s seen. There’s no fat or veins, but a filmy coating on the muscle fibers instead. It is, however, clearly meat.

She looks back over her shoulder at her mother. “This is definitely not man-made, nor is it any creature I have seen before,” she tells her. “I believe it to originate off-world.”

Her mother glowers. “I hate when we are forced to allow your friends here,” she says.

Diana nods obligingly as she stands. “I will request that they send women warriors,” she promises. She looks doubtfully out at the army hovering over the ocean. “But it is a rather large force.” She reaches into the pouch tied to the side of her belt and removes her communicator. “Wonder Woman to Justice League, do you read me?”

A robot voice responds, “Please verify identification.”

Diana frowns. She’s not supposed to need to sign in to her own communicator. “Diana of Themyscira,” she says.

“Unauthorized user,” says the voice.

“What?” she demands, but the device responds only by turning itself off. “Hello?” Diana presses the buttons again and again, smacks the thing hard against the back like Flash sometimes does. Nothing happens. The device is dead.

Hippolyta waves off this new development. “I will go consult with the gods. Organize your soldiers into alternating watches,” she instructs as she moves away across the rocky shore.

Diana looks up in the general direction of where she thinks the Watchtower might be. Even if she
could fight her way through the alien barricade, that would mean abandoning her people in a time of need for however long it took to sort out matters with the League. She knew where her responsibilities lay. “Yes, mother,” she says.

“Hey, sorry it took me so long,” Wally says, reappearing in the bunker under the Flash Museum. “Oh, hi, Bart.”

“Do you know how worried I've been?!” Iris and Barry demand at the same time.

Wally shrugs helplessly. “We're not supposed to be using our phones, so Hal killed mine before I could call and tell you the same,” he explains. “He's probably killed yours and you just haven't noticed yet. Anyway, you need to get a pesterchum account because that's where all the talk has moved to.” He glances to Bart. “Also why don't you have one? You're ‘the youth.”'

Bart shrugs. “I wanna talk to my friends, I can go see them in less time than it takes to type out a message,” he says. “I have to long press to use half the keyboard!”

Wally groans. “That's why you modify the settings or download a more efficient keyboard app, Bart.”

“Well, maybe I don't know how to do that, Wally.”

“Boys!” Barry chides despite the fact that Wally is in his mid-twenties. “Wally, what have you found out?”

Wally starts listing off items on his fingers. “So first of all, this whole thing is being done by Her Imperious Condescension, and those are drones, which Rose - uh, Lalonde - recently revealed via chat memo are her special alien robot babies? Also they've destroyed like ten things and killed a duplicate Dave and Aradia from another timeline, and that's it. Since then, they've just been occupying cities and searching for heroes. So she says that Signless thinks that this is all some elaborate distraction from some other plot we don't know yet. Batman expanded on that theory that since all the trolls except Aradia are now blending identities with their alt-selves, and since Condescendence is from the same session - even if she's not a player, possibly she's doing the same. Which would give her motivation for kidnapping Rook. Oh, by the way, current theory is he did not run away but was kidnapped by Condescendence using her, um, animal command powers. Which is also what she's using on Beast Boy.

“Anyway, I found Black Canary, and she explained things to me and got me invited onto the memo. I helped her reopen the Arrow Cave - did you know there was Arrow Cave? It's hilarious - and now Fire and Ice are set up there with her along with Jade Harley, Jake English, Calliope, and most of the Titans and some of their family members. Then Jade teleported in this kid and his mom that paradox Dave and Aradia saved from drones, and no one knows why Condy thinks he's important. Oh, and also the Lanterns are there now.

“The plan right now is to get everyone who isn't controlled sheltered in bases that are either heavily protected or not known to Oracle. So far, we've got bases at NYC, Chicago, and Star City. I'm thinking we should move Iris and the twins - the, uh, baby twins - to the Arrow Cave.”

There's a confused exchange of glances among the group. “Uh, and the rest of us?” asks Bart.

Wally shuffles his feet. “You haven't seen the news?”

“Not since Bart got here,” says Iris. She glares at the blank television. “Apparently, it's full of lies anyway.”
“Yeah, um, the drones?” says Wally. “They're occupying the city. This city. Other cities too.”

“What?!” demands Barry. “What are they doing?”

Wally shrugs. “Hovering? We don't know what it is they're preparing to do. But… when they start doing it? I wanna be here.”

Kara Zor-El’s voice crackles on Ollie's radio. “I'm afraid I must announce that the Blue Beetle, Jaime Reyes, has betrayed us all. His Reach-designed suit is enabled by a small Reach device embedded in his spine. The Reach designed it to take control of a native host, create an artificial hero, earn our trust, and then betray us when our guard is down. Which is exactly what he did. He has lead the red beetles here. It is by his order that my teammates were murdered at Titans Tower. It is by his order that Maid of Time and Booster Gold were murdered at their Houston apartments. It is by his order that Arsenal and his family were murdered in Tuba City. It is because of his orders that the majority of the Justice League is now dead or hiding. That my own cousins have disappeared, and I do not know where they are. He himself killed his - Jaime Reyes’s family, as we must admit that whatever his face and his voice says, this thing is not really Jaime Reyes. The real Jaime Reyes is dead. It seems that I never really knew him. But I will not hide. I will not fear. I carry the symbol of the House of El, the symbol of hope, and I - ”

Ollie turns the radio off.

Bro frowns out at the road ahead of them. Finally, he says, “That's a crock of shit, ain't it?”

Instead of answering, Ollie says, “Has Hal given you any updates?”

Bro nods, pointing to his shades. Though not as advanced as Dirk's shades, they do have displays in them so that he can keep an eye on the Trollian memo even though he didn't have the ability to type back. “Well, for one, the Titans, Gold, Maid, and Supers are definitely not dead. Beetle and his family are safe and are absolutely pissed about his being outed and blamed,” he relays. “On a more dire note, there are drone packs all over Nevada, which we're about to drive into… Now.”

Ollie swears as he passes the state welcome sign and shoots Bro a vicious look. “Thanks for the warning,” he says. “Are they shooting?”

“Random civilians? No. But both our identities - and this car, for that matter - are known to Oracle, which means Her Improper Condensation probably knows and has the drones programmed to be on the lookout.”

Ollie sighs. “Fine,” he says. “I'll change the license plate at the next gas station. And… shave. I guess. Since even people who don't want to shoot Green Arrow would probably recognize Oliver Queen.” It’s then that he realizes Bro is staring at him. “What?” he demands.

“Thirty bucks says you look like an even bigger douche without it,” Bro taunts him.

Ollie only rolls his eyes. “Are you still keeping… awareness or whatever of Rook?”

Bro’s face continues not to change, but he leans back into his seat once more. “We’re not exactly headed straight toward him, but it’s the best we can do without off-roading,” he says. Something in his tone changes slightly when he adds, “But he’s… getting further away.”

Ollie’s hands tighten on the wheel. “They’re moving him?”

“No, he’s still in the same place, he’s just… less there…”
“Like he’s dying?!?” Ollie demands.

“Dude, if I knew what I was feeling, I’d be less vague about it,” Bro growls.

“Well…” Ollie sighs again and tries to think, running his hand back through his hair. “Your heart power, it’s not just Striders right?”

“Hm?”

“I mean, could you, y’know, sense who else is with him?”

Bro doesn’t answer immediately. He still hasn’t spoken when Ollie begins to pull over toward an exit that boasts a single gas station. Ollie had thought Bro had simply decided to ignore a stupid question, but as Ollie pulls around the far side of the station, Bro answers, “There’s people with him, but it’s… I can’t…” He surprises Ollie by leaning forward, pulling off his shades, and rubbing at his eyes and temples. “Never done this before.”

“Sorry to push you,” Ollie lies, “but is there anything? Anything that could offer a clue?”

“Cal.” The word comes out a whisper. Like Bro’s afraid it might summon him back. “There’s someone who… it isn’t him, but… They feel like a piece of his puzzle. Like… the angry piece.”

Ollie thinks on that, tries to recall as many details from the full historical record offered by the game players. “Makara?” he finally guesses.

Bro just shrugs and rubs at his face some more before putting on his shades again. “I dunno maybe,” he mumbles. “There’s a heart player, too. That one’s the closest to Rook. Basically on top of him. They’ve wrapped their soul around his like an armor.”

That surprises Ollie. “What do you mean? Did Dirk find him?”

Bro shakes his head. “Nah, not Dirk. Never met Dirk, but I know him by the me-like flavor of his soul. This is someone new to me.”

When Virgil wakes up, he's laying across the back seat of the car, being held upright by Richie, whose arms are clamped around him like he's the last life preserver on the Titanic. “Um, no, I don't- I mean we haven't-” Richie is stuttering to someone. “That is, I think she was just saying that to be insulting?”

“Anyone find out what happened to the elephant that trampled me?” Virgil interrupts with a groan. He grunts in discomfort when Richie’s arms tighten even more in response.

“Oh my god, thank god, I thought you were going to die!” Richie cries, pressing his forehead against the back of Virgil’s head, their position awkward from the way Richie has been holding him up.

“Are you okay, son?” Dr. Hawkins calls back from the driver's seat.

Richie’s breath down the back of Virgil’s neck makes him blush and push away as gently as possible, and, somewhat reluctantly, Richie releases him so that he can sit up properly in the seat. He looks out the window and recognizes that they’re only on the outskirts of Dakota. Bright red objects move through the air to land in spots throughout the city behind them. Drones, Oracle had called them. “Honestly, I'm not sure,” Virgil says quietly. “What happened?”

“You don't remember?” Sharon practically shrieks at him.
Virgil scowls and shoves his fingers in his ears. “Sis, I appreciate that you're worried, but you're doing that thing where you reach the pitch of a teakettle.”

“Just answer the question, Virgil!” Sharon snaps, but she does lower her pitch slightly.

Virgil thinks for a second, then answers, “The last thing I remember is trying to fry Oracle and the drones.”

“Okay, well, you kept going a bit after that,” says Richie. “But she got you with the sticks again as you tried to pull us all out the door. Who knew a paraplegic woman could kick so much ass?”

“Literally anyone who has watched the Olympics, Richie,” Sharon reminds him.

“Point is you then fought a bunch of the drones while we got into the car, but you were running on empty after the blast, in addition to the injuries, so you passed out as soon as we were on the road.” Well, that explains why no one is yelling at him about being Static. They probably yelled it all out with Richie while Virgil was busy being unconscious. “Thankfully, I think the dense afternoon traffic has helped mask us.”

“That won't last once you're in the rural areas,” says a new voice, and by the way both Sharon and Richie jump and his father nearly swerves into oncoming traffic, it seems that Virgil had not miscounted the number of occupants in the vehicle. Four occupants. Five voices. This day just keeps getting weirder.

“Hello, Hawkins family plus one. I am Hal, and I am currently communicating with you via your satellite navigation system,” says the voice. “I am the entity which has temporarily taken the place of Oracle among what remains of the Justice League.”

“What remains?” Richie repeats, and Virgil thinks he hears his father whisper a quick prayer under his breath.

“Let me give you the rundown of what's happening,” says Hal. “Her Imperious Condescension is an immortal alien empress of a species that, for the most part, no longer exists. Its remnants escaped to the this planet to start anew, and she followed after them. Her M.O. is to use a powerful few to control the weaker many. She has thus used her abilities to seize control of Kara Danvers, also known as Supergirl; Barbara Gordon, also known as Oracle; Garfield Logan, also known as Beast Boy; Stephanie Brown, also known as Spoiler; Cassandra Cain, also known as Batgirl. Oh, and the reporter Lois Lane.”

“Okay, five out of six of those are women, and only three have super powers,” says Dr. Hawkins. “Additionally, three are associated Batman. Is there a reason behind these trends?”

“Yes, actually,” says Hal. “She comes from a woman-ruled culture, these happen to be people that were brought to her attention, and most of the Bat Family uses Wayne Enterprises technology, which she has apparently infiltrated. We did already know that last part, but unfortunately we were so distracted by the way corporate funds had been diverted to melting ice caps and selling bombs to warlords that no one noticed the slight adjustment that had been made to the newest line of Bluetooth headsets.”

“Oh man,” Richie groans. He leans forward and smacks his head against the back of the driver's seat. “She could control millions if she's accessing brains through Bluetooth.”

“Very luckily, it doesn't seem to have occurred to her,” says Hal. “We have Mr. Wayne issuing recalls while I make software changes, but it's been a bit difficult to work around Oracle. But let's not
waste further time discussing things that don't have to do with you. Luckily, this is an older model car, making it somewhat difficult to track directly, but traffic cameras are still an issue. As are your cell phones and credit cards. So here's what you're going to do to get away safe: I'm going to download your route to your satnav, then cut it off from satellite connection so you can't be tracked. You'll have to scroll manually.”

“Uh, my GPS doesn't do that,” says Dr. Hawkins, who is handling the weirdness of the situation very well.

“It does now,” says Hal. “Static, you need to gather everyone’s cell phones, tablets, and credit cards and fry them so they can’t be used or tracked. You're all going to be headed into a rural area where they still haven’t installed traffic cameras. There, you’re going to wait to be picked up by Arsenal.”

“Arsenal?” Sharon repeats in disbelief. Virgil hasn't heard of Arsenal before, but the name doesn't exactly scream “stand-up dude.”

But Hal doesn't reply. Dr. Hawkins starts fidgeting with the GPS, but it will only now show one single route. Obviously, Hal has abandoned them as promised. With a heavy sigh, Dr. Hawkins pulls his phone out of his pocket and hands it to his son. “Virgil, when we're finally somewhere safe, you and I are going to have a long talk.”

“Great,” Virgil grumbles.

When the Deputy Arizona State Fire Marshall went out to inspect the destroyed house in Tuba City, he was expecting what he got: A burnt shell where a house used to be. Typical remnants: appliances, bathroom fixtures, the pipes (though those would likely be stolen soon). What he wasn’t expecting was to be grabbed and forced to face a small, pretty young woman the very moment he finished taking notes.

“What happened here?” she demands.

“Young lady,” he chides, starting to pull away.


Slowly, he puts his hands up and answers, “The beetles, ma’am.”

She raises an eyebrow at that. “The old hippie band?”

“What? No,” he says. “The red beetles. From the Reach? The aliens? The ones that have been invading.”

She merely shrugs and releases him. “I’ve been out of the country recently.”

“Picked a hell of a time to come back,” he says, rubbing his throat nervously. He looks her over. She seems unremarkable, but she stands with sureness of power and place that comes with the vigilante set. Though they weren’t common in the southwest, he knew that the Arrows had occasionally worked Arizona and Colorado as well as Navajo and Hopi lands.

She’s looking over the charred remains of the house. “What did you do with the bodies?” she asks.

“There weren’t any bodies,” he tells her honestly. “Fire must've burned too hot.”

She turns to look at him. Then, after a second’s disbelief, she laughs. “Is this little town all dumbass
hicks like you, or are you special?” she asks as she steps past him, heading back to the road. “House fires don’t burn that hot, no matter who set it.”

He rolls his eyes, picks up his notes from where he dropped them on the ground. *What does this weirdo know about alien laser canons?* he thinks to himself as she drives away. It’s only when he turns around to head back to the office that he realizes she’s stolen his car.

“Gold? … Gold. … *Booster*!”

“SNRK! Huh, what?” Booster demands groggily, sitting up in the cushy office chair he’d claimed as his bed fast enough to nearly tip over. Standing over him is Mrs. Reyes. “Um…?

“You and I are going grocery shopping,” Mrs. Reyes informs him. “But first, the girls want permission to touch things.”

Booster blinks slowly up at her. “What?”

She rolls her eyes. “You said not to touch anything, but Rose and Aradia want to use the chemistry tools to…” She makes a face as she tries to remember. “Alchemize prosthetic skin?”

Right. Aradia had gotten the formula from Ted. The idea still made him want to puke, but he had gotten remarkably good at ignoring his problems, as evidenced by the condition of the house above them. Ted’s house. Urg.

Still, it would be ungrateful to tell them no, and he really would be better off getting that prosthetic back.

He rubs the sleep out of his eyes, makes a half-assed attempt to straighten his hair with only his hand, and finally stands up. “Alright, fine,” he grumbles. He never was a morning person, and yesterday’s mood has not improved with rest. “Let me go over safety procedure with you. I know death-by-chemistry-mistake is neither heroic or just, but take pity on the poor mortals in the room, okay?” He makes sure she really does know all the things on the shelf and their warnings (chemist he is not, but Ted made sure he could read a fucking label correctly), makes sure she’s familiar with all the tools, and goes over the importance of the fume hood twice. Then he quizzes her to make sure it stuck. He still doesn’t like it, but he no longer has the grounds to deny her request, so he begrudgingly allows her to get to work.

By then, Aradia has reappeared near Sollux (who is working on his husktop, probably with Hal and Roxy) but not actually interacting with him. She appears to be reading to herself, but as he approaches, he hears, “No, I can’t right now. Booster will freak out again.” But Sollux doesn’t acknowledge the statement, meaning that she’s talking to… someone… else…
Booster halts his steps, tense with anger. Eventually, Aradia senses him and looks up. Before she can speak, he demands, “When were you?”

Aradia frowns in confusion. “What?” she asks, while Sollux sighs, picks up his computer, and moves further away.

“You and Rose asked Bianca to ask me to let you use the chemistry equipment, then I go to talk to Rose and you’re nowhere to be found,” Booster tells her. “When did you go to?”

“I didn’t! I was using the load gaper!” she says, incredulous.

“Good,” he says. “I’m going with Bianca to get groceries. Stay here and stay linear.”

He starts to turn away, but Aradia is on her feet. “That’s stupid!”

He turns back to her, exasperated, annoyed, and ready to argue this. “Excuse me?” he demands.

“Just because you want to be useless doesn’t mean I have to!” she objects.

Booster is intensely aware of the sound of someone gasping behind him. He growls, “We are not being useless! We are waiting for this thing to get organized so we can help as a group without risking further dividing our forces for easy conquest!”

“That’s the point, Booster! We don’t have to wait!” Aradia argues. “We should be at Vanishing point!”

“There’s already at least four teams working from Vanishing Point,” he points out. “Future Dave and Damara, apparently. Present Dave and Present You. Rip and Damara. Don and Dawn. Even Shel and Rani are helping, and knowing how you time players work, there are already probably duplicate teams. We’ll only get in the way, and we are needed here.”

“If you want to stay, fine! But I intend to play to my aspect,” she argues.

“The hell you are!” Booster objects. “Every time I turn my back on you for five seconds, you decide to solve the problem by throwing a paradox at it and dying!”

“You mean every time you get your ass kicked?” she asks.

“If you would stay linear, you’d find out that we are just as capable of - ”

“You’re being unreasonable!”

“I am your mentor, and you will listen to - ”

Booster is interrupted when Aradia decaptchalogues her whip and smacks him across the outer thigh, making him jump back. “OW! What the fuck, Radia?!” he demands.

Behind him there’s a sudden shouting of “Nononono!” from multiple trolls, and he looks back to see Kanaya and Signless attempting to hold back Jaime, who has suddenly suited up, presumably to intervene in the fight. Rose looks from the trolls to Booster to the trolls again, then seems to figure something out and… immediately start laughing. She laughs so hard, she’s quickly in tears, and when the other humans turn to her for explanation, the only thing she manages to wheeze out is “Lusus.”

Booster turns back to Aradia who definitely has her alien hackles raised, but she’s also buzzing that pattern that’s meant to induce calm. “You - I - ” he stumbles, and then finally objects, “I AM NOT
ACTING LIKE A WILD ANIMAL!

Aradia obviously disagrees since the buzzing only amplifies, and she whips him again. Whatever she says back isn’t English, and it all makes him irrationally angry. Of all the alien bullshit he has had to put up with, deciding he’s being “unmanageable” when she’s the one settling arguments with violence is fucking ridiculous. But he is not his dad, and he is not going to react in kind.

He forces himself to take a deep breath and tries again. “Aradia, I am not fucking around, put that away or I will take it from you.”

Aradia instead decides that enough is enough, and makes a bigger swing for his torso, but he’s prepared for this, intimately familiar with her fighting style, and raises his arm in the way to let the whip coil around it instead. Before she can react, he grabs, twists, pulls so that his blaster is aimed right (and boy is he glad he’s been too paranoid to take it off since getting here despite still being in plain clothes), and fires, cutting about 70% of the length right off her weapon.

Aradia stares in disbelief at her destroyed weapon.

Booster uncoils the remaining length from his arm and tosses it to the ground. “I am not being unreasonable,” he says. “I am not fucking around. You need to - ”

And then she disappears with the jangling sound of her music box time machine. Booster swears loudly and reaches for the anchor on his belt that will immediately teleport him to Vanishing Point (or to the Time Sphere, or to Rip, it’s pretty situational, but right now it’s set to Vanishing Point), but then he remembers where he is and that he still has responsibilities toward the rest of the group, despite how the thought of Aradia fucking around on her own makes him ill.

“Right,” he breathes out. “Groceries.” He takes another couple breaths, then turns to Bianca and shrugs.

She chews her lip uncertainly and glances to her husband, who also shrugs. Someone’s stomach growls loudly enough to be heard by everyone else even in this huge room. She sighs. “Alright,” she says. “If you’re ready.”

Booster leads the way back to the door, then up the stairs, and opens the next door to reveal a much older Rose Lalonde leaning against the wall in the hallway, fiddling with her phone. She turns to him and Bianca and grins, quickly captchaloguing her phone. She stands up (with a slight stumble) and shoves her hand toward him. “Dawn Strider,” she introduces herself. “I don’t suppose you have any aspirin? I’ve got the wicked mindwrackings of a hangover twenty years coming.”

There is no way in hell Booster’s going to do that awkward ‘try to shake someone’s right hand with your left hand because it’s the only hand you’ve got’ nonsense, so he just steps away from the doorway (and Bianca quickly, nervously, follows his lead) and tells her, “Downstairs.”

“You have my infinite gratitudes,” she tells him, moving toward the door.

But he reaches out and grabs her arm before she can reach the first step. “Hey, ears,” he tells her.

“Oh, yes!” She quickly pushes her hair aside then faces left and then right to prove that she’s not wearing any Crocker-ized devices.

Booster nods and lets her go. As she begins to descend, he warns, “Hey, be careful. Trust me, those things aren’t fun to trip over because you’re too hungover to watch your feet.”

Rose Dawn turns back to him and grins. “Are you warning me about the stairs, bro?”
Booster glowers and slams the door in her face.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on DCstuck:

**Current TC opened memo on board FRUITY RUMPUS ASSHOLE FACTORY.**
TC: 36.1699 115.1398
TC closed memo.

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New fic schedule: *A* fic will be updated every few days or so. Not necessarily this one, but I'll try to spread my attention as evenly as I can. Sorry, I keep coming up with new ones, lol.

Current fics: DCstuck (this one), Junior League (next-gen Teen Titans), The Ghoul (Batfam after Jason's death, from Alfred's perspective)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!