Summary

John Egbert is the last Dragonborn and may or may not be in over his head. Karkat saves him once and winds up along for the ride. Together they fight crime- er - wander Skyrim in search of adventure. Come join the party for a romantic epic fantasy adventure full of fun and silliness. With a little bit of seriousness and occasional smut, but mostly fun and silliness.

Exactly what it says on the tin. An updated and semi-novelized version of the askskyrimjohnkat blog on tumblr.

I may add more tags as they become relevant. Full list of pairings in the opening notes in order to not clog up searches (will be edited as they appear).

Notes

A quick note on the formatting before people click away: Because this started (ostensibly) as an askblog, there are some journal written in typing quirks. However, much of it has been changed to a more standard second-person-present and scenes have been fleshed out. Also, the POV sometimes changes between scenes. I attempt to make it abundantly clear who's talking in the first paragraph.

So I asked yesterday night (11/5/16) if people wanted to see the remixed version before I actually finished the original. The answer was yes. Currently, I'm planning to update this fairly regularly (either once a week or once every few weeks depending). The story is now complete on the blog, you can find the link in my profile.
Explicit content in chapters 9, 13, 18, and 27.

Full List of Pairings:
Shown: Johnkat, Rosemary, davejade
Mentioned/Implied: janeroxy, dirkjake, one-sided erifef, past gamkar, past mindfang/dualscar, past one-sided karezi, past one-sided john/oc, signless/a lot of unnamed OCs over time (he gets around).

- Inspired by Askskyrimjohnkat by teaandcharcoal
"I'm not buying that." Rorik says, crossing his arms.

"You have to!" You growl. "You're supposed to be a general store!"

"Yeah, and I told you, sootskin, I don't deal in stolen goods."

"I fucking told you, that vampire attacked me first!"

"Yeah, but it weren't on him at the time. I don't make the rules."

"Come on, I'm less than a hundred gold short of being able to afford that house!"

He sighs and runs his hand through his hair. "Look, Vantas. I'm not saying you actually stole it. But that will be no help if the Imperials audit me."

"How are they even going to know?"

Rorik opens his mouth, but before he can say anything there's a crash to your right. You look over and see a potion bottle on the ground. Then another falls and shatters. The next tremor you feel. It's just like the volcanic plains, but you're too far south for that.

Then you hear the roar. You've dealt with draugr. You've dealt with chaurus. You've even taken on a troll or two. But you've never heard anything like it, screeching and booming at the same time. Next come the screams, human this time.

You bolt outside, sickles in hand. The house across the street is burning. So is the bakery, the herbalist, and the temple. When you look up, flaming rocks the size of your head fall from the sky. There's something huge and green clinging to the keep. It roars again and then spreads its massive wings, taking to the sky. There's no way. They're not supposed to be real, just some stupid nord story, but the only word you can think to call this thing is-

"Dagon!" Someone screams, running for the gate.

Yeah, that's probably a good idea. You follow, but the beast turns its attention to the walls. It spews fire at the gatehouse and the portcullis falls, trapping you inside the walls. No, there is no way you're fucking dying here! You turn back towards the blaze that used to be main street.

Well, you're a dunmer. Fire's supposed to be your thing, right?

You sprint towards the keep. Helgen's a small town; it's not too far. Three blocks away. Two. One.

Something big and heavy rams into your side and you topple to the ground. You look up and it's a human. Imperial you'd have to guess; he's too dark to be a Nord but the hair's not right for a Redguard. He's dressed in rags and his hands are tied behind his back. Wait, you thought they were bringing in Stormcloak prisoners today… He squints down at you.

"Sorry!" he says, a slight Colovian accent in his voice. "I can't see."

"What do you mean you can't see?" You want to ask him, but then the dragon roars again. So instead you say. "Come with me if you want to live."
Oh gods, did that really just leave your mouth? Oh come on Karkat, you fucking idiot! But hey, the Imperial nods and you get him inside the keep. So you'll count the stupid line as actually working.

"I don't know how much help hiding in here'll be," he says. "I already saw that thing break through the guard tower."

"Well then it's a good thing we're not hiding," you reply, slicing through the ropes binding his hands. "There's a secret exit hidden in the barracks."

"Oh. Neat! And thanks! I never would have known that. I'm John by the way, and-"
The door slams open and two legionaries race inside.

You sigh with relief. "Can't believe I'm saying this, but I am so glad to see you-"

"You're one of the prisoners!" one of them says, pointing at John. "Don't let them escape!"

"Seriously?" He says, "The town's burning down and I didn't even do anything!"

"Yeah, well, welcome to Skyrim," you reply.

You ready your sickles and lunge forward, but before you make contact, two fireballs race past you. Each hits a soldier in the face and knocks them to the ground. You turn. How-? Did the dragon-? No, instead John stands there, hands still smoking. He has a weird square pair of spectacles on his face that weren't there a moment before.

"That's better," he says. "Now, where did you say this way out was?"

"You're a mage?" You demand.

He shrugs sheepishly. "I can do some magic. But, um, if you know where I could get some actual weapons and armor that would be great. They took all of mine."

So not just a mage, a **battlemage**. Why the hell would they arrest this guy? Shouldn't he technically be like an officer or something? Whatever, it doesn’t matter now. You look over the legionaries. Well, their heads are better off not being described, but the rest of them… The big guy looks like he might have been about John's size. You kneel down and start unfastening the armor.

"What are you doing?" He demands, wrinkling his nose.

"Well, it's not like you could squeeze into my clothes, even if I gave them to you." You offer him a gauntlet.

He pauses for a moment, and then reaches out to take it from you. "I guess you're right."

No one else tries to storm in as you get him armored up, thank Stendarr. He reaches down to the other imperial and takes her warhammer. He turns it over in his hands and then looks up at you.

"Let's go... uh..."

"Karkat," you say.

He smiles. "Got it. Well then, let's go, Karkat!"

You pick the lock on the door and lead your new companion through the maze-like substructure beneath the castle. Some other people are fleeing, and most of them don't cause you any trouble.
Even the torturer and his apprentice just are just packing up some things and running.

But then when you make it to the caves you're stopped again. Five legionaries let the others pass, but stand between you and safety. "Surrender," one of them commands, brandishing a sword.

"Seriously?" You demand. "There's a dragon! Everyone else is running!"

"And that man came in with Ulfric Stormcloak," the soldier says.

You scoff. "Seriously? You think he's a Stormcloak? Look at him for a second!"

"I mean I'm not," John says. "But they did shove us in a cart together on the way here."

"They what?!" You gape at him.

"Watch your back!" He says. He leaps in front of you, blocking the legionary's sword with the handle of his hammer.

Well, fine. They fucking started it. You draw your sickles and rush forward. They're heavily armored on their chests and shoulders, but that makes them slow. You dance around shields and swords, sinking your blades into arms or the backs of knees.

Fireballs fly, but they're not coming from John this time. There's an atronach at his side, picking off any legionaries that are too far away for either of you. John moves more slowly than you do, but when he hits it fucking counts.

The last legionary backs away, dropping her bow. "Mercy," she pleads.

"She was trying to kill us," you point out.

"Yeah, but she was just following orders." John puts his warhammer on his back and dismisses the atronach. "You can go, but do me a favor."

"Anything!"

"When you get back to your commander, tell them that I'm not part of the rebellion. I'm a battlemage, and if they'd have given me a trial I could have proved it."

She swallows. "Yeah! Sure! Whatever you say!"

"Good!" He smiles and hands her back her bow. "Good luck!"

She turns and bolts for the exit.

"So I've been meaning to ask, are you a battlemage-battlemage?" You ask. "The kind that's normally part of the army?"

"Yep! Trained at Battlehorn Castle and everything! I'm not technically in service right now though because-"

The ground shakes.

You grab his arm. "Talk later. Run now."

And your timing's good, because as soon as you reach the exit the chamber collapses behind you. But from there the rest of the journey is smooth. Usually bears live in here, but someone else got to
them first. Their bodies lie crumpled on the ground. You grab a few of their teeth to make potions with later.

When you make your way out of the cave you hear the dragon roar. You crouch down behind a rock and pull John with you. It can’t have followed you, and maybe if you don’t move… Thankfully, the monster flies off towards the mountains. Well that’s lucky.

"Okay," you say once it's just a little speck in the distance. "I think we're safe."

He nods. "Yeah. Where do you think we should go?"

"I-"

You turn back towards the town. Black smoke billows upwards, and the breeze carries the scent of burning flesh. You can't see anything, but maybe that's for the best. Still, it's gone. The whole town is just… gone. The inn, your supplies, your gold, that house that was finally, finally about to be yours.

This feels just like the day you had to leave Windhelm. You might as well be watching the last three years of your life turn to smoke too.

"Are you okay?" John asks.

"Fine!" You say as convincingly as possible.

He frowns. "Okay."

"There's another town not far from here," you say. "If we follow this road it'll take us right to Riverwood."

"What about Whiterun?" He asks.

"Why do you want to go there?"

"I mean," he looks off towards the mountains. "If there are Dragons flying around, someone should tell the Jarl, right?"

"Probably. Don't see why that someone should be us, though."

John frowns. "Because we don't know if the other survivors will think of it?"

You shrug. "If you want to go I won't stop you. But Whiterun's past Riverwood. Might as well stick together until we get there. Otherwise we'll just wind up doing that awkward thing where we say bye but keep walking in the same direction."

He nods and together the two of you set off for Riverwood. John fills the time with questions about the structures you pass, some of the plants you see. It gives you a chance to ramble on about the hold, and he actually listens to you with rapt interest.

You know? This Imperial doesn't seem so bad. And he hits like a frost troll. Maybe you'll keep him.
like i got a real start to my adventure today! and karkat's sticking with me for now, which is nice. he really knows his way around!

basically what happened is this guy called lucan, who runs the general store, had this thing called the golden claw stolen from him, so karkat and i went to get it back. we had to kill all the bad guys, and that's actually how i got this journal. the leader who had the claw had it and had only used like two pages, so now it is mine (i tore the other two pages out because they didn’t really matter).

after we got the claw back we found out that it was secretly the key to some long-sealed part of the ruins. we were still going to give it back, so we kind of just figured why not. that was when we started running into the zombies (i think karkat said they’re called draugr here? whatever), but they weren’t too bad.

but the end of the place was really weird. it just suddenly opened up and there were waterfalls and sunlight and all that sort of stuff. and there was this massive wall. the wall is really the important bit.

we walked up to the wall to investigate and i started hearing voices. i couldn’t understand them but as we got closer and closer to the wall they started getting louder and louder. a set of runes carved into the stone started to glow and then there was light wrapping around me. my vision went blurry for a moment, and this word appeared in my mind, complete with its meaning and spelling, but i somehow couldn’t wrap my tongue around the sounds.

i was about to ask karkat about it, but then another zombie appeared, and this one was a lot tougher than the others! we won, but just barely.

by the time we made it back to riverwood it was too late to sell our loot, or even to return the claw to lucan (probably because we stopped a ways away to wash the sweat and blood off in the river. it was so cold, but i felt a lot better afterwards, even if i still don't have any decent clothes to change into at this point) so we went back to the inn instead. this time since we had a little more money we got some drinks.

karkat’s a lot less grumpy after he’s had some mead. i can understand why - the nord mead is really good! it’s a little stronger than what they have in cyrodiil, though, so i’m feeling kind of fuzzy and warm right now, but i like it.

a few hours ago the bard started playing this song everyone seemed to know and everyone started doing this weird dance thing. i asked karkat if he could teach me. he got all blushy and flustered, but i said that i wanted to celebrate my first dungeon right and he gave up. nord dancing is hard, but fun. you get really close to the person you're dancing with, so karkat and i were stepping on each other a lot. but that's okay, because he's kind of cute when he's flustered. he's super pale for a dark elf, so it's really obvious when he blushes, especially since i'm used to redguard and darker imperials.

after the bard decided to call it quits, we did too. right now we’re still sitting at one of the tables, listening to the crackling of the fire and writing. i kind of hope we can get to talking in a bit. i mean, we’re adventuring together but we still know next to nothing about each other. but i don’t know how to really start off.

"hey, karkat. we've known each other for less than 36 hours and most of that was sleeping or fighting for our lives, but you wanna give me your entire life story?" yeah, that'll go well. maybe i can strike up a conversation on the road?

when we wake up tomorrow we’re planning on selling our loot and then heading off towards white
run. from there, who knows? i just hope that the inn there has bigger beds. karkat’s really warm when he sleeps, so i got all sweaty and gross last night. bluh, not looking forward to that again.

it seems like he’s just about finished now. do you usually say goodbye or goodnight in a journal? i’ll have to ask later.

By the time you wake up the next morning the sun is already really high. You wanted to leave early but looks like that's not gonna happen. Apparently two stressful days of intense dungioneering and fighting makes you tired. Who fucking knew, right?

Ugh, this is why you'd always taken a day off between adventures. But John is apparently all energy all the time, and you don't want to look weak in front of this idiot. And you do get the pressure, making it to Whiterun is important. Then you can tell the Jarl about the dragon problem, wash your hands of it, and get back to focusing on the more lucrative raids instead of this cross-country bullshit. John can keep doing it if he wants, you don't really care.

But if you have to go on a road trip, it's kind of nice to have someone to talk to.

"So where are you from, anyway?" You ask as the two of you set off.

John lights up like someone just told him all his wildest fucking dreams had come true.

"Well, I'm from Cyrodiil, just west of Chorrol, at the base of the Colovian Highlands. My family is super into adventuring, so it was always me, my dad, and my three cousins as a kid. My one uncle did what he could but he's stuck in a chair and my aunt and other uncle would pop in now and then, but it was mostly just us."

"What kind of farm were you running that everyone got to just disappear?"

"Oh, uh… it wasn't exactly a farm…"

"Some little town then? Still though, if you don't have any older siblings shouldn't your dad be teaching you how to do whatever trade he's in?"

"Well, it's not really a trade either. We kind of, um, own a castle up there?"

"A castle," you repeat flatly. "You're a fucking noble."

He looks away. "I mean, we're just a tiny little barony." Shit, he is.

"John, What the fuck?!"

"Yeah, um, this is why I didn't say anything right away. You don't have to make a big deal of it or anything. I mean, not like it helped me at the border."

"But why come up to this shithole? You can't need the money."

"Well, I mean, it's kind of a tradition. But even if it wasn't there's less gold in the castle than you'd think. Maintaining that kind of infrastructure is actually kind of expensive. Dad showed me the books because he expects me to take over one day and blah blah blah blah blah."

Okay, maybe he's not actually saying that last bit. But it's what it sounds like. The most you'd ever have to handle is a tiny little house in a city somewhere, so to be honest you don't give too much of a fuck.
But then John asks "What about you?"

"Gray Quarter of Windhelm."

"Oh right! That's the… yeah."

"You can say it." You roll your eyes. "It's the filthy, crowded slum where all the Dunmer who have to stay in the city live. So it should be obvious why I got out."

"Well, good for you. Been on your own long?"

"Since I was sixteen. So about three years now."

He stops walking and stares at you.

"What?"

"You're only 19?"

"Yeah. Wait, how old are you?"

"I'm 21."

Now it's your turn to look away and blush. "Not all of us get to sit around in a fucking castle and wait until we feel like it's time to take a vacation."

"Hey! That's not how that went!"

"Oh really?" You snap. "Because that's what you make it sound like!"

"I stuck around because everyone else left!" He takes a deep breath. "My dad's strong, but he can't run a whole castle by himself. But with their head starts, my cousins made enough money with their adventuring that they can start sending some back home. I'd only gotten as far away as Chorrol so Dad told me to go see the world while I had the chance, to 'learn what it means to be an Egbert.' And then I stumbled ass first into a Stormcloak group at the border. They let me spend the night with them and then in the morning we got captured and taken to Helgen. I lost my supplies, my equipment, and if it weren't for that Dragon they would have killed me."

"The Stormcloaks let you stay with them?"

"That's the part of the story you pick out? I mean, yeah, but-"

You snort. "They must be getting desperate."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, you're an Imperial."

"So?"

"So? How massive is the rock your castle is under?! People around here say Imperial like it's a slur. Like, I have heard actual slurs yelled at me with less venom."

"Oh. I didn't realize it was that bad…"

"No, we just start civil wars up here for no reason!" you snap.
"I'm sorry, okay?! I've been through a lot in the past few days."

"Well so have I! All of my shit was in my room at the inn. I spent three years looking through dungeons and scrimping and saving as much as I could, and I was only a few weeks away from being able to get a house of my own, and then the entire fucking town burned down. What you see on me is all I've got to my name, and unlike some people my family still works for a living so I can't exactly write to beg them for more gold go home with my tail between my legs."

John recoils like he had been hit. And age be damned, for a moment he looks like a lost child. Your damn soft heart gives way and any emotional fortifications you'd built collapse.

"...But I guess I'm used to that. And you're not. While I'm picking myself up it might be nice to have company anyway."

John smiles. "I'd like that."

You look away and keep walking.

---

That night you dream of fire. You dream of smoke and fire and dragons. Battlehorn Castle is off in the distance, and you know that if you can just make it there you'll be safe. the castle has always been safe. But the dragons can fly faster than you can run. They encircle you and just sit there, watching.

One of them, large and white, lands right between you and your castle. It turns its blood-red eyes on you and approaches slowly. But instead of opening its mouth to breathe fire or chomp you in two, it nudges you gently with its snout.

It speaks without opening its mouth. "Remember your duty, child."

In the real world, you sit bolt-upright. The sun hasn't quite broken the horizon, but judging by the color of the light coming through the shutters it should soon. You grab Karkat's shoulder and shake him.

"Mmm?" He opens one eye, bleary and unfocused.

"We have to go."

"Nooo." He rolls over, away from you. It's a good thing he didn't try that yesterday. He would have just fallen out of bed.

"Karkat, we have to tell the Jarl about the dragons!"

"After sunrise."

"No, Karkat. Come on!" You try to pull the blanket away, but he has a vicegrip on it. "We have to go now."

"He won't be up yet."

Wow, for a skinny little thing he sure is refusing to budge. "Well, fine, we can take our time getting up and dressed then."

"You might not know this, but it's generally advised to take a day off before running back into the jaws of death." Hmm, sarcasm and a longer complex sentence. Maybe if you can just keep him talking…
"Look, this isn't dangerous, we just have to talk to him soon."

"And it'll take five minutes. So we can go after sunrise."

"I think I can hear people downstairs getting food ready," you point out.

"Yeah, getting it ready. It won't be ready until later."

"There'll be bread and cheese."

"And in an hour there'll probably be eggs and sausages." Oh, his voice has gone completely clear.

"Yeah, but you're awake now," you say triumphantly.

He sighs. "Yeah, and who's fucking fault is that?"

You laugh and leap out of bed. "Come on, let's go!"

Karkat grumbles, but he does actually sit up and stretch. By the time you're finished getting clothes on he's vertical.

"...We're gonna have to wear our armor, aren't we?" He asks.

"I mean, unless we want to show up basically naked."

"That's what I thought."

You're not sure what he's complaining about. At least he has leather armor. Iron is hot and heavy and the padded vest you have to wear under it only makes it worse. As soon as you get the septims together you've got to buy yourself a proper outfit. After the next adventure, you tell yourself, you're at least getting a decent shirt.

Karkat was right about the breakfast thing, but leftovers are good enough for you. Honestly, you don't get the obsession Nords seem to have about hot breakfasts. Especially this time of year when it's warm outside and there's fresh fruit everywhere.

Then you begrudgingly trot back upstairs and get the rest of your equipment on. Hopefully, it makes you look like a big tough adventurer who's worth listening to. It probably would have been more effective if you'd had your old stuff, though. Now that would have been intimidating. (Even if you know there's no way you could metaphorically fill The Colonel's shoes, his old gear literally fits you just fine. You're still having trouble believing you lost it right out of the gate.)

Whiterun is worse to navigate than you thought it would be. Sure, Chorrol might be bigger, but at least there you know the lay of the land. And here none of the streets even seem to have names. People just refer to areas by their "district," and you have no frame of reference for where anything is. Thankfully, Karkat seems to be at least passingly familiar with the city. And apparently all you have to do is go up in elevation.

Which is still easier said than done. It's way too easy to get turned around here. But eventually you find the steps of the Jarl's palace. Not that you knew what it was at first. It's not much of a castle really. There's some stone walls in the building, but most of it is wood and clay. Not to mention how many blind spots there would be. You thought it was a church until you were stopped by a guard.

"Halt, the Jarl is not hearing grievances. Come back on Sundas at ten in the morning."
"We don't have time for that!" Karkat exclaims. "We have to talk to Jarl Balgruuf now!"

"Whatever quarrel you have cannot be that important," The guard says, crossing his arms. "Move along."

"We're survivors from Helgen," You say. "We need to tell the Jarl what happened so he can protect Whiterun."

"Oh. Well, I suppose that's different, then." The guard opens the door. "Go on through."

The great hall is a little bit more like you had expected, with long tables and a roaring fire. There's a throne at the far end of the room and a massive dragon skull hangs above it. It's probably fake, but still pretty cool looking. As you approach the throne, a dark elf draws her sword and approaches you.

"What is the meaning of this?" She demands. "The Jarl is not seeing visitors."

"Yeah, we heard, but we have information about Helgen," Karkat says.

"Hmph, that does explain why the guards would let you through. Step forward."

You do as you're told; carefully approaching him with the deference you'd usually show to a count. Karkat just trudges up. If you had to guess you'd say Balgruuf is probably in his late thirties or early forties, a few lines on his face but you can't see any grey hairs among the blond ones. He sits in the kind of carefully relaxed pose powerful people like to make to convince people they're calm and in charge when they really feel like everything is spinning out of control. If he has a full court, most of it is nowhere nearby. A balding Imperial stands at his side and whispers something in his ear. So he's got at least one adviser and one special bodyguard, but you can't see signs of anyone else. At least for now.

"So, what can you tell me of Helgen?" The Jarl asks. "Our scouts saw the fires, and there have been rumors of Dragons of all things."

"Well, they're right," Karkat says.

The Imperial makes a sour face.

"They're telling the truth." You say, switching to the proper pronunciation. Karkat gives you a weird look, but you ignore him. "We were both there. It attacked Helgen and burned the city to the ground. The two of us barely escaped."

"Did you see where it was heading?" Jarl Balgruuf asks.

"It looked like it was flying North," Karkat says. "The city might be in massive trouble if we don't do something."

"We should send reinforcements to Riverwood," the dark elf suggests. "If the creature was heading north, it would reach there first."

"Ma'am, if it was flying straight, it would have been here by now," You point out.

"Then it must be in the mountains, we must gather a force and-"

"Irileth, that is a preposterous idea!" The Imperial snaps, "We can't put troops along the southern border. Falkreath will take that as an act of war."
"Silence!" Jarl Balgruuf says. "I will not stand by and allow this monster to destroy my land and murder my people. A small force will go to Riverwood."

"Yes, my Jarl," Both of them say, placing their hands over their hearts before they back away.

"You have done well bringing me this news," Jarl Balgruuf tells you. "But I am afraid I may have more to ask of you yet."

"Why us?" Karkat asks.

"You are adventurers, are you not? My court wizard, Farengar, has been working on a plan to defend against these dragons if the rumors are true, and since they are I suspect he may need some help to get the city prepared in time. You'll find him in the East wing." He gestures to a door on his left.

Oh good, they do have a mage. He'll be useful if it all actually does go to shit. When you enter the room, you see a man dressed in dark robes hunched over an enchanting table. He doesn't even look up when you enter, even though your armor clangs ludicrously with each step you take.

"Hmph, if you mean to discuss the war go find Caius. I have no interest in the matter."

"Yeah, we're not here for that," you say. "Actually, the Jarl sent us to help you out with your research."

"Ah, well I suppose that is a different matter then." He stands straight and turns his attention to you. "I'm looking for a particular artifact. It's a large stone found within Bleak Falls Barrow, vaguely pentagonal in shape. It should have complex markings written upon it."

"Oh! I think we have one of those!" You say.

"Have one? You cannot simply-"

You remove your pack and search through it. "We already went to Bleak Falls Barrow and we picked it up. Honestly, we tried to sell it back in Riverwood, but the trader there didn't want it. We were gonna look in the markets after we finished up here!"

"You were just going to sell it?!” The wizard demands. "That is a priceless ancient artifact!"

"I mean," Karkat says. "We're adventurers. Plundering tombs is kind of a big part of the job description."

"Gosh, Karkat, it sounds kind of awful when you put it that way!" You say, as you find it.

He shrugs. "I mean, it kind of is."

"Anyway, here you go!"

Farengar snatches it out of your hands. "By the nine… This is really it! Oh, the things I can learn with this!"

"So," Karkat says. "Are you going to pay us at all for-?"

"Dragon!" Someone shouts from the main hall.

So of course you both run back out.
"What happened, soldier?" Irileth demands.

The soldier is bent over, breathing heavily. "Dragon… at the western watch tower… ran as fast as I could…"

"Thank you. You've done well," Irileth says. "My Jarl?"

"Go! Quickly, take as many guards as you can on your way."

"We'll go too!" You shout.

"We'll what?!" Karkat demands.

"I- I was not expecting that," Jarl Balgruuf says. "But you have my gratitude. Please, do your best."

Now this, this was the kind of stuff you were hoping for! This is your chance! You turn on your heel and bolt out the door.

"Hey wait!" Karkat shouts.

Hey, if he doesn't want to come, he doesn't have to. Thankfully, you kind of have an idea where you're headed now, and everyone is getting out of your way. Probably because you're running around in full heavy armor, but whatever. You're most of the way through the wind district before you realize you have no idea where the western watchtower is. Eh, whatever. Get out of the city, head west until you see a tower or a dragon. How hard could it be?

Gosh, it's not easy to keep this pace up, though. When you make it to the gates you have to stop for a moment to catch your breath. But that's okay, because the guards also have to open the doors for you.

"Hey! Wait up!" Karkat leaps over a low wall and scowls at you.

"You don't have to do this," you say, frowning.

"Like fuck I'm gonna let a goddamn dragon kill off another town! Besides, you have most of the gold."

"Heh, you could have just said you wanted to come with me."

"Yeah right." Without another word, he steps in front of you and heads out into the countryside.

You think you see the tower in the distance. Or, at least, you see a massive pillar of smoke you're assuming are the remains of the tower. It's over a mile out. Either that guard ran fast, or he was a sentry with some damn good vision.

Hopefully, the dragon won't catch you two while you're out here with no one but the sheep and cows.

What follows is probably the tensest half hour of your life. You've been in rough situations, sure, but that was all humans or draugr. You have no idea how the hell you're supposed to take down a dragon. Fuck, you don't even have a BOW. Your ears strain to pick something out, some noise of dragons or cries for help, but you can only hear your armor clanging as you cautiously move forward. When you get closer, you begin to be able to see and smell the fire itself. For being outside, the smoke is awfully thick.

"Anyone there?!" you call. "We're here to help!"
The only response you get is the crackling of fire.

The two of you carefully search what's left of the tower, only to find rubble and a few charred or torn bodies. You want to help, really, you do, but some of them you can't bear to look at. Seeing people like this... Well, it's a lot easier to deal with bears and bandits.

"We should head back," Karkat says, "or at least get our distance and wait for-

An ear-splitting roar drowns out whatever he was about to say. This dragon is different from the one in Helgen. Instead of a long serpentine body, it seems to be stockier and has rear legs. The head is about the same, though, and overall it looks a lot more like the traditional pictures of Dragons you've seen.

"Oh, shitfuck," Karkat says flatly. He draws his sickles but presses back against the side of the tower.

That's a good idea. Maybe if you're lucky the dragon won't even-

It looks straight at you and opens its mouth. Never mind.

You leap out of the way just in time for the creature to incinerate the grass where you had just been standing. It seems to notice that it missed and begins climbing in altitude again. You try to follow it with your eyes, but the sun is so bright and you have to look away.

Yeah, this was probably a bad idea. But as it starts diving you ready an ice bolt and try to shoot for the center of mass. You don't hit the body but, even better, you manage to tear the membrane of one of its wings. Its flight path starts to wobble and you shoot it again, aiming for the damaged wing. You hope that's enough, you don't have much more magic in you.

Thank Nocturnal, the creature crashes to the ground. But it's not dead yet, it turns and readies to shoot fire. You and Karkat both manage to dodge and then you draw your hammer. On the ground, you should be able to finish it.

...You hope you can finish it.

But you don't even make contact. Instead you trip over a large stone block and tumble forward. Your glasses fall off and suddenly everything is a blurry mess. But you do see a flash of pink as the dragon opens its mouth to strike or spit fire or something. You tell yourself to move, but you can't. You just freeze, staring up at the creature you're sure is going to kill you.

Then there's another blur coming in from the side and the dragon roars in pain again.

"Don't just sit there like an idiot! Do something!" Karkat shouts.

You get back to your feet and conjure a new pair of glasses. Karkat has one sickle buried in each of the dragon's eyes. It swings its head back and forth, trying to dislodge him, but he holds tight. You run behind the dragon's head and bring the hammer down on its neck.

There's a horrific crunch and the dragon's body goes slack.

Karkat pulls his sickles free and slides off of the creature's head. "Holy shit," he says. "I thought you were about to die."

"So did I," you say. "But we did it!"
"Yeah, I suppose so." He turns back to look at the dragon, and the body bursts into flames.

You both jump about three feet in the air and back away. The heat from the fire is intense, and you can't do anything but watch as the dragon's skin and flesh is consumed, leaving only the bones behind. Then white wisps of light radiate from the body, heading straight for you.

Reflexively, you throw up a ward, but it passes right through. But whatever this final attack is, it doesn't hurt. Actually, it's warm and tingly and kind of nice. The light wraps around you completely, blocking out your vision, and then dissipates.

In its place comes an understanding. The image of the word wall from bleak falls barrow enters your mind, and a handful of the characters stick out. You don't know the language, and you don't know the context, but suddenly you understand this word like you understand Cyrodillic.

"John? Are you okay?" Karkat asks almost timidly.

"Yeah," You say shakily.

"What was that?"

"I have no idea."

It's then that the guards finally make it to you.

"Ugh, figures," Karkat grumbles. "Couldn't move a teensy bit faster, could you?"

"Well, that was certainly something," Irileth says.

"Ma'am, it was more than something," One of the guards says. She removes her helmet. "It was the stuff of legends."

You feel yourself blushing. "Come on, we weren't that great."

"No, not the battle. Imperial, though I do not doubt that you fought with bravery. No, I think you're Dragonborn."

"I'm a what now?" You ask.

Karkat scoffs. "Oh come on. That's just some old story."

"What? And dragons aren't?" The guard demands. She turns back to you. "Do you know the shouts?"

"Come on. If he knew them I would know by now. And he would have used some in the fight. Right, John?"

"Actually," you say slowly, "I think I do."

"What?!" He demands.

"Just now, when we killed the dragon, there was this word that popped into my mind."

"Oh? What was it?"

"Fus," you say, remembering the feeling and the meaning and Karkat is on the ground now.
What?

"The fuck did you do?!!" He yells pushing himself back up off the ground.

"Shit! I'm sorry!" You scuttle over and help him to his feet. "It just kind of happened!"

"Okay…" he says. "So shouts are real. And dragons are real. And oh fuck me this is actually happening, isn't it?"

"What's happening?"

"Congratulations," Karkat says, clapping sarcastically. "You're officially the world's last hope. Hooray."

"Perhaps we should explain on the way back," Irileth says. "The Jarl must know of this immediately." She turns and begins heading back to the city, the guards following in her wake.

"We'll meet you there," Karkat says. He steps inside the dragon's ribcage and begins picking around at the skeleton.

"Karkat, please," You beg, "I need you to tell me what's happening."

"Do they ever tell the legend of the dragonborn in the south?" he asks, looking at a relatively small bone before shoving it under his arm.

"I mean, they say the Septim emperors were dragonborn, but that was just a title, wasn't it? And I know I'm not part of that line. I mean, if I was my dad would be emperor instead of Titus."

"Exactly. Ooh, how did a dragon get a diamond? Anyway, the Nords believe it was more than just a title, or at least it was for some of them. Like did they teach you about Talos? At all? I know it's supposed to be illegal but I have no idea how closely people outside of Skyrim follow that edict."

"I just know he was the first emperor of the Septim line and then supposedly turned into a god?"

"Yeah, the Nords think he did. It's super central to their mythology. But they say he had the blood and soul of a dragon. Somehow. Because magic. And that gave him the power to kill dragons, eat their souls, and learn their powerful magic words."

"Huh."

Karkat straightens up. "Okay. I think we've got everything worth taking. Let's go." The two of you start walking about to town. "Anyway," he continues, "Tiber Septim was the last person everyone completely and totally agrees was an actual dragonborn. But the legends say that one day at the end of the world there'll be another one who's supposed to fight Alduin, the legendary super dragon. And at least those guys seem convinced you're it."

"And what do you think?" You ask him.

He inhales but then pauses. "Well, I don't know. I've never cared too much for legends, but every now and then a blind squirrel finds a nut."

You don't respond to him. Your mind is too busy running in circles as you try to decide if you want this or not.
AND THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN MORE THAN ENOUGH FOR ONE DAY, BUT NO. ON OUR WAY BACK TO REPORT TO THE JARL THERE WAS ANOTHER SHOUT THAT SHOOK THE FUCKING GROUND. IT TURNS OUT IT WAS THOSE OLD COOTS ON TOP OF THE BIGGEST FUCKING MOUNTAIN IN TAMRIEL ASKING JOHN TO COME VISIT.


SPEAKING OF HOUSECARLS, THEY GAVE JOHN THIS WOMAN NAMED LYDIA. I DON’T TRUST HER. IF NOTHING ELSE, SHE IS REALLY FUCKING SERIOUS ABOUT SERVING JOHN. LIKE. SHE ALWAYS CALLS HIM “MY THANE” LIKE HE NEEDS ANYONE TO FEED HIS STUPID HERO COMPLEX. IF THE REST OF THE DRAGONBORN TALES ARE TRUE, WE NEED TO KEEP HIM ALIVE. AND PREFERABLY NOT TOO FUCKING OBNOXIOUS, OR ELSE I MIGHT KILL HIM MYSELF.

I JUST- IT’S A GOOD THING THAT JOHN DIDN’T SEEM TO REALIZE HE COULD ASK HER TO COME WITH US AND SHE’D SHIT HERSELF IN EXCITEMENT. I HAVE NO PLAN TO TELL HIM THIS. I DON’T LIKE HER.

OUR PARTY IS BIG ENOUGH, THANKS.

JOHN IS DOWNSTAIRS, BUYING DRINKS FOR EVERYONE AGAIN. I’VE DECIDED I’M KEEPING MOST OF THE GOLD WITH ME. THE DRAGON SCALES AND BONE WERE WORTH A LOT, SO I GAVE HIM LIKE FIFTY GOLD TO PLAY WITH. THAT SHOULD KEEP HIM BUSY. IT WOULD BE REALLY FUNNY IF HE’S HUNGOVER TOMORROW.

WHATEVER. I’M GOING TO SLEEP.

---

john: *groans* fuck, we’re not doing any questions today, are we?

KARKAT: OH, WHY DO YOU ASK?

john: ow! please don’t yell, karkat.

KARKAT: WHAT WAS THAT? I CAN’T QUITE HEAR YOU. TRY SPEAKING LOUDER.

john: you’re an asshole. just let me die. *buries self in pillows*

KARKAT: JUSTICE.
KARKAT: I THINK THAT I WOULD KILL MYSELF BEFORE I JOINED THE LEGION. BUT THE REST OF THAT SOUNDS DOABLE. AND JORRVASKR IS HERE IN WHITERUN AND I KNOW A COUPLE COMPANIONS SO WE COULD PROBABLY-

john: noooo. i just wanna die.

KARKAT: PFFT. LIGHTWEIGHT.

john: i don’t caaare. just let me die…

KARKAT: WELL, HE’S USELESS. FUCK. I CAN’T JUST LEAVE JOHN HERE, SO I’D BETTER GO HELP WITH THE ISSUE THAT MIGHT ACTUALLY KILL US RIGHT NOW.

KARKAT: *PULLS ON ARMOR* I’D BETTER GET SOME FUCKING RECOGNITION THIS TIME.

*One (much easier due to the assistance of NPCs) fight later*

Dragon: *Dies in front of Bannered Mare*

john: *absorbs dragon soul and wakes up, cured* w-what happened? oh, wow, karkat, you look kind of-

KARKAT: SINGED? BLOODY? MURDEROUS?

john: i was gonna say tired. do you want the bed for a while? i can go and sell all of that junk.

KARKAT: SURE. WHATEVER. *HANDS OVER LOOT AND FLOPS ON TOP OF BED*

john: okay. i’ll see you soon. and thanks for taking care of me today.
John: Well, I’ve got basic knowledge of all the major schools, but I’m especially good at restoration, actually. I like hammers a lot more, though. You don’t run out of the ability to swing like you do magicka!

John: Hey Karkat, I’m trying to put the cheese wedge back in the cheese wheel to make a restore fatigue potion but the alchemy set isn’t letting me. Also Impstool and red mountain flower make a cure disease potion, right?

Karkat: Ingredients. Now

John: But I-

Karkat: Now.
All in all, you think you did pretty well in Whiterun. You got plenty of supplies and, at Karkat's insistence, you took your day to rest. Of course, you didn't have all that much of a choice since the day after that second dragon fight both of you slept like twelve hours. Gosh, these long expeditions are harder than you'd thought they'd be.

Your new clothes are the most amazing things you've ever owned. Well, okay, they're kind of shitty linen and you're back to wearing green instead of blue which makes you feel almost like you're back in Jake's hand-me-downs, but they're yours and you can actually be comfortable and decent at the same time and fucking Arkay you've missed that.

Karkat seems a little less excited about the wardrobe change (even though he was starting to complain about not feeling clean too) and has instead spread your shared supplies across the bed. In addition to the really important stuff you got in Riverwood, now you've got an axe, a pan, a tent and bedrolls, two water skins, and a pretty solid amount of dried meats, bread, and cheese.

"Is that everything we need?" You ask.

He blinks up at you. "Isn't adventuring like your thing?"

"Maybe, but you know Skyrim better."

He frowns. "Well, it's all we're gonna get unless we wanna dress provocatively and hang out in the seedy part of town at night hoping someone into something a little exotic comes by, because we are completely broke."

"Oh."

"Yeah." He starts carefully packing your bags.

"So," you say after a moment, "You've been at this for a while. How is the adventuring in Skyrim?"

"It's alright. Not a lot of competition at least."

"Really? There are so many ruins and things to explore!"

"Well part of it is the fact that Nords are stupid and superstitious. Most of them are afraid of magic so they stay away from the Dwemer and ancient Nordic ruins to begin with, but with the war going on adventurer numbers are down even further."
"Huh, I would have thought that would mean more people trying to take advantage of the chaos."

"I didn't say bandit numbers are down. Actually, there are way more than there used to be with all the supply carts to raid and the guards being distracted. But most of the roaming mercenaries that weren't complete amoral pricks got sucked into one army or the other one."

"But not you."

"Oh sweet Azura no."

"With how much you seem to hate the Stormcloaks, I would have thought."

"I hate both sides. The Stormcloaks might be racist assholes, but I'd have my ashes dumped in the gutter before I help the Thalmor, even indirectly. To be honest, I give so few fucks about who wins this damn war it's created a rift in reality almost big enough for Ulfric's ego. If I had the option I'd just pack up and move somewhere far, far away."

"Heh, maybe you could come live with me in Battlehorn Castle!"

"Oh, that sounds delightful. Between doing that and castrating myself with a rusty wooden spoon it would be a rough choice."

You snort. "How does a wooden spoon rust?"

"Because it's just that awful." He flips the backpack shut. "Now let's get going."

You tell yourself he's just being a dick. At least… you hope he is.

You're not that bad. …Right?

LOREDAS 23RD LAST SEED, 4E 201

SO BECAUSE JOHN'S SUPPOSED TO GO SEE THE GREYBEARDS WE STARTED HEADING EAST. I'M NOT EXACTLY LEAPING FOR JOY AT THE PROSPECT OF HEADING BACK TO RIFTEN, BUT WE'LL BE HALF WAY THERE ALREADY, AND THERE MIGHT BE SOME EASY BOUNTIES TO PICK UP. IF WE EVER GET THERE. FUCKING TALOS, FOR SOMEONE WHO RUNS STRAIGHT FOR DRAGON ATTACKS JOHN WALKS MORE SLOWLY THAN A HORKER WITH GOUT.

IT WAS ALREADY NOON BY THE TIME WE GOT TO THE RITUAL STONE AND DEALT WITH THE NECROMANCER THAT WAS THERE. SERIOUSLY, WHO JUST CAMPS OUT AT ONE OF THOSE STONES? WELL, OKAY, WE DID FOR A WHILE TO EAT LUNCH, BUT WE WOULDN'T HAVE ATTACKED ANYONE WHO WALKED BY.

BUT THEN IT WAS BACK TO FUCKING MEANDERING AROUND THE ROAD, JOHN PAUSING AT EVERY FUCKING TURN TO PICK FLOWERS. I SWEAR HE HAS LIKE 300 POUNDS OF MOUNTAIN FLOWERS OF VARIOUS COLORS IN HIS PACK RIGHT NOW. ALTHOUGH IT IS KIND OF IMPRESSIVE TO SEE HIM CATCH BUTTERFLIES. THINGS NEVER KNEW WHAT HIT 'EM, BUT IT JUST MAKES IT MORE OBVIOUS THAT HE CAN GO FAST AND IS JUST CHOOSING NOT TO. I WONDER IF HE'S DOING IT JUST TO TORMENT ME.

WHEN WE GOT TO VALTHEIM TOWERS SOME CHICK TRIED TO CONVINCE US THAT WE NEEDED TO PAY HER 200 GOLD EACH TO PASS THROUGH. I TOLD HER TO…
OFF, BUT THEN SHE ATTACKED US TOO. JOHN SAID IT WAS BECAUSE I WAS RUDE, BUT THEN IT TURNED OUT THEY WERE JUST BANDITS WHO HAPPENED TO BE CAPABLE OF SOMETHING VAGUELY RESEMBLING RATIONAL THOUGHT.

LUCKILY, AS IT TURNED OUT, THERE WAS A BOUNTY ON THE HEAD OF THEIR LEADER, SO WE'LL BE ABLE TO CASH IN ON THAT THE NEXT TIME WE'RE IN WHITERUN. THEY HAD SOME DECENT LOOT STOWED AWAY TOO: ENCHANTED BOW, EMERALD RING, GOLD CIRCLET. WHEN WE GET TO THE NEAREST STORE WE’LL BE ABLE TO MAKE SOME DECENT MONEY. MAYBE PICK UP SOME CLOAKS FOR WHEN JOHN INEVITABLY WANTS TO GO FURTHER NORTH.

WE’RE SPENDING THE NIGHT IN THE FAR TOWER. THEY HAD A SOLID DOUBLE BED, WHICH IS BETTER THAN WE’D GET ANYWHERE ELSE UNLESS WE PUSHED ON TO IVARSTEAD, AND IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE IT'S TOO BADLY INFESTED WITH ANYTHING. WE BARRICADED THE DOORS AND JOHN SET UP A SYSTEM OF WARDS TO WARN US IF ANYONE COMES DURING THE NIGHT. RIGHT NOW WE’VE DUMPED OUR ARMOR IN A CHEST AND ARE COOKING SOME RABBIT STEW FOR DINNER.

YOU KNOW, THIS REALLY ISN’T SO BAD WHEN YOU HAVE COMPANY. I’M ALMOST STARTING TO LIKE THIS CAMPING OUT AND ADVENTURING THING. WE’LL SEE HOW LONG THAT LASTS. I GIVE IT A WEEK.

---

sundas, 24th last seed, 4e201

karkat yelled at me for picking flowers again today. honestly, i'm kind of starting to worry he really doesn't like me. at least we made good time to ivarstead.

it’s a tiny little town, but we figured there might be some jobs to do, so we went around and talked to everyone. there was one lady who wants us to bring her 10 bear pelts, which is kind of a lot, but if we run into more bears, we might as well, right?

but the real interesting job we got was investigating this place called shroud hearth barrow. everyone in the town thought it was haunted, but it turns out there was just a sorcerer in there trying to find treasure (but he couldn't get in because he couldn't find the claw-key thingie he needed. it turns out the guy in the tavern had it the whole time and gave it to us for finding out what the deal was! hah, talk about irony!)

we managed to sell some of the loot, and we at least got rid of the heavy stuff. if nothing else, that should make climbing the mountain easier tomorrow.

---

morndas, 25th last seed, 4e201

we made it to high hrothgar today. karkat kept pushing me to go faster, but i just can’t help it. skyrim is beautiful and i just want to look at everything. but i guess i’m probably going to spend a few years here, so maybe eventually i’ll get used to it. i hope not. but, man, some of the local traditions are weird! apparently most people here just climb mountains by hopping like goats! i don’t even know why they bothered to build roads, really, because according to karkat adventurers have really never used them. they just go in straight lines. i’m not really sure it’s faster, but you get to see more cool stuff! i told him that, and he just looked away and muttered something about flowers again.

i told him i was sorry. jeez.
we left pretty early in the morning and then we started climbing and climbing. and climbing. that
mountain sure is big! i mean, i’d seen it on the map, but that doesn’t really do it justice. we had to
kill a few frost trolls and saber cats on our way up, which was kind of tough. but the good news
about the saber cats is after we took their pelts i could wrap them around my shoulders. i lived
pretty far north in cyrodiil, yeah, but i don’t think it ever got that cold! and its only last seed. oh man…

eventually, though, we did make it to the monastery. it turns out there are only four greybeards.
well, okay, there’s also their leader, but she lives way up even higher and we can’t see her because
we're uninitiated anyway so in my opinion she doesn't really count. i was expecting like at least a
dozen. i mean there's like fifty moth priests in the imperial city. and even though they're blind their
monastery has so much ornamentation and this is all just plain stone. i guess that's what happens
when you live way up on a mountain? or something?

ey taught me two shouts and then sent us off to find something called the horn of jurgen
windcaller, but by that time it was getting dark and the wind was starting to blow harder, so they’re
letting us stay the night.

karkat’s been different since we got here. he’s being all reserved and quiet, which is really not like
him. i asked him about it but he just shrugged it off. but maybe i’m wrong. it's only been like a
week, after all. maybe it is like him? i mean, when we first met i kind of got the feeling that he
really liked to talk, and he seemed especially happy when he was telling me about how things are
up here.

i just hope he feels better in the morning. not sure he will, because the beds are made of stone for
some reason (but i guess it’s still better than the floor)? i get my own tonight, partially because
there’s no way in hell we could both fit on one of those. honestly, i didn’t realize how much i’d
missed sharing a bed. i haven't slept next to anyone since i was a little kid. even when jake and i
went on adventures near the castle we always had our own bed rolls. this morning when i woke up
karkat’s arm was draped over my waist and i

TIRDAS 26TH LAST SEED, 4E201

JOHN WAS GIVING ME THESE WEIRD LOOKS ALL DAY. I HAD THE FEELING THERE
WAS SOMETHING HE WANTED TO TALK ABOUT, BUT HE SEEMS PHYSICALLY
INCAPABLE OF JUST SPITTING IT OUT.

THAT BEING SAID, WHATEVER IT WAS I WAS PRETTY DAMN SURE IT WOULD
INVOLVE THE KIND OF HEART TO HEART THAT MAKES EVERYTHING AWKWARD
AND EMOTIONAL AND FUCK THAT. I’VE MANAGED NOT TO CRY IN FRONT OF HIM
YET, AND I’M GOING TO DO WHATEVER THE HELL I CAN TO KEEP IT THAT WAY.

LUCKILY, WE DIDN’T HAVE MUCH TIME TO SIT AROUND AND CHAT. WE LEFT
FIRST THING IN THE MORNING AND I CONVINCED HIM NOT TO WASTE TIME
TAKING THE ACTUAL PATH DOWN. PARTIALLY BECAUSE IT’S FASTER AND
PARTIALLY BECAUSE IT’S KIND OF HARD TO START A CONVERSATION WHEN
YOU’RE HOPPING DOWN THE SIDE OF A MOUNTAIN, SO THAT SAVED ME FOR A
WHILE.

BY THE TIME WE WERE DONE WITH THAT IT SEEMED LIKE HE’D FORGOTTEN
WHAT HE WANTED TO SAY. SOMETIMES HE’D GET THIS LOOK IN HIS EYE LIKE HE
REMEMBERED, BUT I ALWAYS MANAGED TO FIND SOMETHING NEW TO DISTRACT
HIM, LIKE A COOL ROCK OR WEIRD BIRD. SERIOUSLY, HE HAS THE ATTENTION SPAN OF A SMALL CHILD.

BUT THEN WE RAN INTO A DRAGON. THANKFULLY, THOUGH, THIS TIME WE BOTH HAD BOWS AND PLENTY OF FROSTBITE VENOM.

WE WERE PRETTY TIRED AFTER THAT, SO WE DIDN'T QUITE GET ALL THE WAY TO RIFTEN. A FARMER ABOUT FIFTEEN MILES OUT AGREED TO LET US STAY IN HIS HAY LOFT FOR JUST A FEW SEPTIMS. WE SHOULD MAKE IT TO TOWN BY MID-AFTERNOON WITHOUT MUCH TROUBLE. I MEAN, I'M SURE THERE WILL BE TROUBLE WHEN WE FINALLY GET THERE, SO I'D LIKE AT LEAST THE MORNING TO GO FAIRLY SMOOTHLY.

When you wake up John is spooning you through the bedrolls. When you fell asleep you were lying close to each other, yeah, but you were both on your backs with like an inch of space between you. But now? Now your damn body betrayed you at some point so you rolled over and let him press up against you without bothering to ask your opinion first. He's got one arm wrapped around you, pulling you close to his chest. He's snoring softly in your ear, so you know it wasn't on purpose, but he still did it. At some point, consciously or not, he decided it was a good idea to reach out and grab you.

And you? You have the audacity to like it. You try to tell yourself it's just that kind of hazy morning feeling, where since you just woke up everything is way too comfortable and you don't want to move, but you know it's more than that. Even through two bedrolls he's so warm and solid against you, and being held like this makes you feel all safe and small in a way that you haven't since-

No. It's not emotion. John is infuriating. He's absolutely naïve and a complete fucking idiot. Yeah, maybe he was able to be surprisingly dignified with the Jarl and some of the questions he asked the greybeards about magic went way over your head, but even a dog can be trained to behave when you have company.

Right, you're just reacting like this because he's hot. You're man enough to admit (at least to yourself) that he's attractive for a human. Come on, he's over six feet of muscle and virility with sweet blue eyes and smooth dark skin and an ass you could bounce septims off of. If it weren't for the nose and overbite he could be one of those fancy bronze statues from the Northwest Quarter brought to life.

And now you're going back and forth about whether you want him or want to be him. This is why you usually focus on girls; they're so much less confusing in that department. Not like you'll have much of a chance as long as you're travelling with this prick. Unless maybe you're distracting somebody's friend so he can make out with the cute one. Yeah right, even if you ever got that desperate you are an awful wingman. Besides, you're pretty sure no matter how gorgeous the person they'd have to fling themselves into his arms to get him to realize what they wanted and said theoretical friend wouldn't allow that.

At least that obliviousness might keep him from realizing that you-

He nuzzles your neck just a little bit and murmurs something unintelligible. You freeze, but then he settles back down, his breath warm and wet on your shoulder.

Everything inside your chest cavity melts like snow near a blazing fire. Azura fucking dammit. Maybe it wouldn't be so stupid to try and-
No. Bad Karkat. You've known him just over a week, and most of that time you've been pretty busy. It doesn't matter that you've been up in each other's shit and that it feels like he's told you his whole life story. He has to be picking and choosing the better bits like you are. And as you are going to continue to be up in each other's shit for the immediate future, it's not like a quick no-strings-attached thing is a good idea, especially since you are an idiot who gets too emotionally attached to everything.

Even if it did turn out that you really get to know each other and by some miracle he finds something he likes in you, it's not like it could end well. He's just taking a little vacation in your world, and sooner or later he's going to have to go back to being a noble. And you know there are different rules in play there. Fuck, he's probably already engaged to someone he may or may not have ever met. You are being stupid and dumb and-

He stirs behind you, rolling away. Even through the thick blankets the cold morning air stings against your back. But then he groans softly as he sits up to stretch and, oh hello, things are warm again. You pull the covers up over your face and think about dead puppies.

"Heh, you still asleep, Karkat?" He places a hand on your shoulder and shakes you lightly. "Come on, buddy, we should eat something and get going."

You pull one hand free and shoo him off. He laughs at you again, light and airy and annoying. Why is he so perky when he was completely passed out a minute ago? Yes, focus on that.

You don't look, but it sounds like he's getting up and putting clothes on. By the time he asks you "Hey, what do you want for breakfast?" your blush has died down enough for you to drag yourself out of your cocoon without any extra embarrassment.

"Why are you so intent on eating all the time?" you demand.

"Breakfast is important and good for you!"

"I'm not hungry," you say as you pull on your leggings.

"Aw, don't be like that. If we don't eat now I know you're gonna be hungry later and then we'll have to stop."

"I can hold out a few hours until we hit Riften."

He frowns and shoves a piece of bread at you. "Eat."

You sigh and take it from him, rolling your eyes. As long as he's awake, at least there's a tension between "cute" and "little shit" that'll make your life bearable. Akatosh just forbid you ever get used to him.

From where you're standing, Riften looks kind of like someone took Whiterun and flipped it upside down. Whereas Whiterun was built up on a strange rocky outcropping in the middle of flat nothing, Riften seems to have been built up in the base of a valley surrounding this massive lake. From what you can see over the walls as you begin your approach, there's tons of wooden walkways going through the town, probably over canals? It reminds you a lot of the pictures you've seen of Bravil. And from what Karkat's told you about it, it seems to have a similar seedy reputation.

When you reach the gates a guard stops you.
"There a problem?" Karkat asks.

"Yeah," she says. "New law, if you want to enter the city you've got to pay a toll."

"That's bullshit and we both know it."

"I'd watch your tongue, grayskin, or you'll get taken through this gate and straight into prison."

"Come on," you say. "You've got to let us in. It's been illegal to charge citizens to enter cities across the Empire since-"

"Oh, well maybe you haven't heard, but we ain't part of the empire anymore." The guard says smugly. "And under Ulfric we have the freedom to create tolls, and also the freedom to say that foreigners have to pay twice as much as good citizens of Skyrim."

Karkat groans. "Whatever. We don't need to spend our gold in your fucking slum anyway. Come on, John."

He turns and starts walking away, but not back the way you came. Instead, he heads south, around the side of the castle wall.

"Hey, where are we going?" you ask.

"There's always more than one way into a city this size," he replies.

You plod along after him down to the docks. A number of Argonians walk or swim around briskly, carrying large baskets brimming with fish. Karkat heads towards a slanted stone building sticking out from the city walls, but a large Argonian stops you.

"We cannot allow travelers through the fishery," he says. "You must enter the front gate."

"Mih paka naktis c'ahuth Windhelm-di," Karkat says.

"Huh?" you ask.

"Kosuxh." The argonian says, crossing his arms.

"See Kankrihuth-sinha. Ulfric see thdei."

"Hmm… I am still uncertain if that is true, but you must care something for us to know that much Jel. Come quickly." He opens the door and the two of you scurry inside.

"That was awesome!" You say, as you enter Riften's streets. "How did you do that?"

Karkat shrugs. "When I was a kid we spent a lot of time down at the Argonian assemblage in Windhelm. Dad did a lot of work trying to improve the situation for the fishermen down there, and they taught me a little bit in case I needed help."

You laugh. "Well, it paid off! You speak any other languages?"

"Well, a good amount of Dunmeri, obviously. Some of the real old assholes are stuck in their ways and will barely speak to you if you talk to them in Cyrodillic. I can get most of Aldmeri because they're so similar, but I can't really speak it."

"Nice! Nothing I know is anywhere that useful if you're not just trying to read old books…"
"Well sucks to be you, then. But here we are! The Bee and Barb, best guesthouse in the city."

The two of you head inside and rent a room. It's small enough that you could probably touch all four walls if you stood in the right spot, but whatever. At least you have somewhere to leave most of your crap.

"Alright," Karkat says. "You stay here. I'm heading out."

"Why are you bossing me around?"

"Look, it's a city of thieves, and I'm not so sure it's a good idea for you to be wandering around with all the loot."

"What?" You ask. "You don't think I'm perceptive enough to-"

Karkat rolls his eyes, takes your purse out of his bag and plops it on the table in front of you.

"Wait- what? When?"

"When we were eating lunch I took it as a test to see if you'd catch on."

You sigh. "Okay fine, you can go."

He stands with a smirk and walks out the door, pack full of treasure.

You wait a few minutes and then head out into the streets yourself. If you don't have that much of value then, you figure, Karkat should have no objections. And if he does, too bad. You might even be able to find some work or something.

There's a bigger variety of people here than in Whiterun, you realize. You knew about the Argonians, but there's also a decent number of dark elves in the city. And while a lot of the population is still Nords, there's plenty of other shades of human mixed in as well. In Whiterun you and Karkat turned heads and incited comments, but here everyone seems to just be going about their business. In spite of that guard earlier, you're starting to feel a little more at home.

The marketplace bustles with activity. A number of booths are crowded in a small square outside the temple, their tenders hawking everything from jewelry to armor to meat. But your attention, of course, is drawn to the one person it's not supposed to be.

A female dark elf stands on the far side of the market place, hiding in the shadow of a seemingly precarious overhanging apartment. She wears a wide-brimmed hat to further obscure her face, but you can tell she's watching the market very, very carefully. But something about the way she holds herself is oddly familiar to you. Maybe she's also an adventurer from Cyrodiil and you bumped into her at some point? You should probably go ask.

It's surprisingly difficult to make your way across the square with the crowd milling around, but eventually you make it. You smile and approach her, hand out in greeting.

"Hi!" you say. "My name is John Egbert, nice to meet you."

She smiles. "Vriska Serket. The pleasure's all mine."

middas 27th last seed,

…so i spent a while hanging out with vriska and she told me all about the city. it turns out the jarl
really doesn’t do anything, and the person keeping order is actually a dark elf named meenah peixes, but everyone calls her the honeywitch because her family makes this mead that everyone says is magic somehow. i’ll have to try some later.

anyway, this place is a mess! the guards are completely corrupt, which we kind of figured out from the taxing thing, and don't do anything for the people of the city. but vriska says that the thieves guild is actually helping. they at least regulate the crime and try to make sure that everything ends up back in the right hands. like some argonian had stolen vriska’s mom’s ring! she made a distraction and i got it back for her. when i gave it back she was so happy! she told me i should go to a place called the ratway and find her later.

i’ll need to talk to karkat about it first, though. i don’t know where this place is, and i don’t think i can trust any of the locals because vriska said they might want revenge!

i did find a lot of quests asking around, though, so that’s good. we should have work for a while.

wow, i hope karkat gets back soon!

MIDDAS 27TH LAST SEED 4E201

I DECIDED NOT TO TRUST JOHN WITH ALL OF OUR LOOT IN A CITY OF THIEVES, SO HE AGREED TO HAND IT ALL OVER SO I COULD SELL IT TO SOME HONEST MERCHANTS.

BUT HOLY FUCK, YOU WILL NEVER GUESS WHO I RAN INTO WHILE I WAS VISITING THE COURT WIZARD.

ERIDAN. FUCKING. AMPORA.

I WAS COMPLETELY FLOORED BECAUSE I HONESTLY NEVER THOUGHT I’D SEE FISHFACE AGAIN AFTER HE LEFT TO TRY TO STUDY IN WINTERHOLD. MOST PEOPLE JUST STAY LOCKED UP IN THE COLLEGE OR BLOW THEMSELVES UP. BUT THERE HE WAS IN RIFTEN.

WE WANDERED AROUND TOGETHER FOR A WHILE, SELLING MY STUFF, TALKING A LITTLE BIT ABOUT WHAT WE’D BEEN UP TO, BUT HE WAS BEING STUPIDLY VAGUE. THAT IS, UNTIL HE PULLED ME INTO AN ALLEY.

IT WAS THEN THAT HE TOLD ME HE’S WITH THE THIEVES GUILD NOW. APPARENTLY HE GOT SICK OF THE MAGES AND ENDED UP JOINING VRISKA ON HER PARENT-SEARCHING TRIP. APPARENTLY SPIDERBITCH THE FIRST IS THE GUILD MASTER, SO VRISKA’S CREAMING HERSELF TRYING TO CLIMB THE RANKS.

I ASKED HIM WHY *HE* WAS STILL HERE, THEN, AND HE SAID HE’D EXPLAIN IF I CAME TO GET A DRINK WITH HIM. I RELUCTANTLY AGREED (BECAUSE HE WAS PAYING) AND HE LED ME DOWN THROUGH THE RATWAY TO THE RAGGED FLAGON. IT’S CREEPY AS FUCK DOWN THERE, BUT I DID MANAGE TO SELL THAT CIRCLET I’VE BEEN LUGGING AROUND TO A REDGUARD WOMAN SINCE I WAS WITH ERIDAN.

ANYWAY, TO CUT OUT A LOT OF BITCHING AND MOANING, ERIDAN IS HEAD OVER HEELS IN LOVE WITH PEIXES THE YOUNGER. HE’S WORKING HIS ASS OFF IN THE GUILD IN ORDER TO IMPRESS MEENAH SO SHE’LL LET HIM MARRY FEFERI, WHICH
APPARENTLY HE HASN’T EVEN TALKED TO FEFERI ABOUT IT YET AND SHE JUST THINKS THEY’RE FRIENDS.

HE KEPT GOING ON AND ON ABOUT HOW ‘its destiny kar wwere both from noble families wwhovve been exiled from morrowwind’ AND ‘i lovve her more than anythin’” AND I JUST TOLD HIM THAT HE’S BEING RIDICULOUS AND IF HE DOESN’T TELL HER HE LIKES HER SHE’S NEVER GOING TO FUCKING KNOW. AND WHAT THE FUCK WOULD SHE THINK ABOUT HIM GOING BEHIND HER BACK TO IMPRESS HER MOM ANYWAY?

BUT DOES HE LISTEN? NO. NOBODY EVER LISTENS TO KARKAT’S LOVE ADVICE. NO ONE. EVEN WHEN THEY ASK FOR IT IN THE FIRST PLACE.

EVENTUALLY HE STARTED GETTING DRUNK AND A FRIENDLY BRETON IN THIEVES’ ARMOR GUIDED HIM TO THE BACK, WHICH IS WHERE I ASSUME THEIR HEADQUARTERS IS, BUT I TOOK THAT AS MY CUE TO LEAVE.

JOHN’S BUGGING ME ABOUT SOMETHING BUT I WANTED TO GET THIS ALL WRITTEN DOWN BEFORE I FORGET. I GUESS I’LL HUMOR HIM NOW.

—

I AM NEVER LETTING HIM WANDER ALONE AGAIN.

NEVER.

_____

turdas, 28th last seed, 4e201

so in spite of karkat flipping his shit yesterday when i told him i’d met vriska, this morning he agreed he’d go to the ratway with me. it’s good that he did, because the tunnels down there were really confusing! and there were also a few people who tried to mug us, but we managed to scare them off and no one got hurt.

the ragged flagon is kind of a weird bar. there’s water all over the place and all these weird empty corners big enough to put a horse stall in. there was an old wood elf there who said she can change faces, but we didn’t have the money for it even if we wanted her to do it.

we barely stepped inside when vriska saw us and was all like “Joooooooohn!” and ran over and looped her arm around my neck. then she said, “Oh, hi Karkat. I hope I didn’t keep you two w8ing long.” (apparently she actually writes like that! so weird.)

she took us into the back. it turns out one of their storage closets is actually a secret entrance to the thieves guild’s base! it was so cool in there! they had waterfalls and people practicing archery and other combat moves and in the middle of this room there was an island kind of thing.

and wow, the guildmaster is something else. first of all, she's drop dead gorgeous with this long messy black hair and clear silver skin. she's got this long black coat that absolutely hugs every curve. and it's weird because she's missing an arm and an eye but somehow that only makes her more beautiful? maybe it's since it's her attitude that just pulls you in more than anything else. being with her is like being a rabbit in a cage with a sabercat. you just… you can’t breathe, you can’t look away, you can barely think. when i looked over at karkat he was practically gawking at her too.
and then she said “I see what you mean. Nice work, Vriska.”

Vriska perked up and then did an over-the-top bow.

The guildmaster turned to us and just, holy shit. Like, seriously, holy shit. She could have stabbed me with the feather in her hat and that would have been absolutely, one hundred percent okay. Then she said “Congratulations boys, you’re in. Vriska, tell them what they need to do.” and strutted off.

I was really confused. In what? But then I realized we’d accidentally gotten ourselves into the thieves guild. Oops.

After that Vriska rolled her eyes and started going on and on about how lucky we were, how she’d needed to do a ton of legwork to get involved, even though the guild master was her mom. She led us back into the flagon and got us drinks, so that was cool, but I will never say anything about Karkat talking a lot again. Neither of us could get a word in edgewise.

Eventually she finally got around to telling us about our mission. We’re supposed to go and burn some beehives belonging to someone named Captor (Karkat freaked out because apparently he’d been friends with someone with that name, but Vriska says it’s a distant cousin). But as soon as she gave us the details and assured us they were hording money they owed the people of Riften, she changed the subject.

Apparently they were already planning to have a party tonight! With free food and drinks! It’ll be a lot of fun, I think, and it should be starting soon. Got to go!

---

Things start a lot like that first night in Riverwood. Some of the songs are the same, and the dancing is identical. And you’re getting better at it! You barely step on Karkat at all, and you even manage to keep up with Vriska for a bit. You do have some of the Peixes mead and it really is that good. Everything is warm and pleasant and you’re relatively content. Then, one by one, most of the people start trickling away until it’s you, Karkat, his old friends, and the two Peixes kids. Vekel hands the older sister — whose name is also Meenah — the keys.

“Do what you like,” he says, “I know your family’s good for it. I’m goin’ to bed.”

She nods solemnly. But as soon as he shuts the door, she turns to the rest of you with a wicked grin.

“Alright,” she says, “Y’all ready to get fucked up?”

Vriska cackles. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

“Huh?” you ask.

“Aww, that not a thing people say in Cyrodiil?” Feferi asks. “It’s a more e-fish-ant way to say become absolutely inebriated.”

“Yeah, no, I figured that out from context,” you reply.

Meenah slides over the top of the bar and Vriska follows. The two of them start pulling out bottles of all shapes and sizes and then Vriska rolls a whole cask of beer over. With significantly less ceremony, Eridan pulls out a pack of cards.

“Oh?” Karkat asks.

“Come on, Kar,” Eridan says, pulling the cards from their box and shuffling. “You didn’t really
think we'd let you come through here without a little ring of fire?"

He smiles, lifting his hand to cover it. Not that it's at all convincing. You're right across from him for Arkay's sake and it doesn't fool you for a second. "You want to have your prissy little ass handed to you again?"

"Oh, don't worry. I know I can't beat you, but this ain't about me."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you might have inherited a Nord liver, but looks to me like your friend's an even higher weight class than you, and the Peixes..."

"Come on, you can do it!" Feferi says.

Eridan lets out a long-suffering sigh. "The Peixes drink like fish."

Feferi laughs and claps. "Come on, that wasn't so bad!"

He blushes and looks away.

"Aww, playing koi?" Meenah asks, placing about ten bottles on the table.

Vriska slams her keg down right next to you and places and slams an empty cup in the middle. "So how this game works: Eridan's gonna spread these cards out around the mug. We go around in the circle, drawing one card. Each one has a special meaning, which we'll get to. Now don't worry, John, there is no shame in giving up, as long as you realize we're all teaming up to take down Karkat."

"Why're we doin that to the poor bouey?" Meenah asks.

"Because they're intimidated," he says, giving Eridan a superior smirk. "Because the last time something like this happened I played with Flin and won."

Feferi lets out a low whistle.

"I have no idea what that is," you say, "but I'm guessing it's a big deal."

"It's somewhere between really strong wine and Cyrodiilic Brandy," He says.

"Why would you do that?!" You demand.

"To assert dominance."

But gods does he look pleased. You're not entirely sure whose side you want to take. Yeah, you like Karkat, but if what Eridan says is true...

You grab a bottle of mead. Either way, it seems like this is happening.

"Alright, I'll go first," Meenah says. She pulls a card out of the deck and flips it face up on the table. It's an ace. She cackles and Eridan goes pale.

"So what does that one mean?" You ask.

"Everyone starts drinking, and you don't stop until I do."
Okay, sounds easy enough. Then she lifts her bottle and starts chugging. And chugging. And chugging. About fifteen seconds later, she turns her bottle upside down.

"-And if I finish, it means you gotta too."

Okay maybe this will be harder than you thought.

A few turns pass. As every new card gets flipped someone explains what it does, and by and large it's pretty uneventful. And then you draw a queen.

"What does this do?" you ask.

"What time is it?" Feferi asks.

"Hey, Karkat, ohn marghan ist?" Meenah asks, nodding towards you.

Karkat opens his mouth, closes it, and then drinks. Everyone else at the table dies.

"You have to keep asking questions until someone fucks up," Vriska explains. "You don't have a question or you repeat one, you drink."

"So, uh, what did she say?"

Meenah presses a finger to her lips with a grin and Feferi draws a card.

But as the game progresses the time between turns gets longer and longer. Between each draw, there's banter, slowly developing into stories. Karkat looks happier and more relaxed than you think you've ever seen him, no matter what people are having him do. And you're fairly certain it's not just the alcohol. He's stayed surly with this much in his system before. You seem to be having trouble looking away. Vriska tells a joke in Dunmeri and Karkat laughs, light and free and hypnotic.

And then he looks at you, that carefree smile still on his face. Your heart stutters and your stomach flops. Oh…

Then he has the audacity to say your name, and when he does he says it with almost surprising gentleness. All the air leaves your lungs.

Oh no.

"Um, it's your turn," he says, grin turning into the smallest frown.

You snatch a card and, thankfully, you're supposed to drink. That gives you a second to calm yourself down. Haha, no big deal. Feferi draws and the game continues.

Eridan is the first to give up and start nursing some water, and Vriska follows shortly after. Feferi holds on for a few more rounds, but then shakes her head and pushes her mug away.

"Ready to give up, hla-serjo?" You're not entirely sure what he called her, but it's probably pretty bad from his tone and her snarl.

"Fuck off, peasant." She draws.

Honestly, you're kind of done with this whole thing. You're tired, you're well past tipsy, you had to drink a disgusting combination of three different drinks, and all you want to go back to the inn and sleep.
Oh gosh, you're gonna be sharing a bed with Karkat. Please don't be awkward. Please, please don't be awkward.

And then he takes the last card and it's over.

"Can I have my cards back now?" Eridan says. "I'm just about ready to go to bed."

"Fine by me," Meenah says. "I have one more idea."

You groan and set your head on the table.

There's the soft clink of glass on wood. You don't see what, but it sounds like it's small.

"Hulod?" Karkat asks. "Arent we a little old to play that, or are you just doing this to keep making fun of me?"

"Nah, Karkrab," She says. "It's what's in the bottle."

You lift your head, but when you see the bottle it startles you back awake. It's a tiny little thing, smaller than your average potion bottle. But those sapphires in the label… "No fucking way."

"What?"

"That's Balmora Blue," you say. "How did you even get that?"

Meenah smiles. "The Peixes have many connections."

"Wait, really?!" Karkat demands.

"Yep, this is the real deal." She pops the cork and gathers up four of the empty mugs. "Sudden death tiebreaker. Whoever can finish theirs and go back for seconds wins."

It seems like she is pouring about the same amount in each of them, but you double check just to make sure she's not cheating. This might be stupid, but if you're this close you still want to win. She pushes all four to the middle of the table. Karkat takes one, you take one, and then she leaves the final in the middle of the table. You look down. There's barely a splash of liquid in there. And as soon as you finish you can go to bed.

"On your marks," Feferi says, "Get set… Go!"

You slam it back and shit you've tried strong stuff before, but this is like liquid fire. Your tongue is completely numb and your eyes water. Oh gods, you feel like you're gonna puke. All you can do is lay your head on the table in defeat.

There's the sound of metal scraping over wood, and then a mug slamming back down. "Boom! In your faces!" Meenah shouts.

The five-foot-one, rail-thin elf stands up, towering before you. Across from you, Karkat's face is just buried in his hands and he shakes ever so slightly.

"You okay?" You ask him.

You reach out and gently touch his hand.

He shakes his head and pulls away. Then a bit of sound leaks out of him and you realize he's laughing.
"Fuck, John, why are we doing this?" He asks, still shaking with laughter. He folds his arms and sets his head down on them, peering up at you through his eyelashes.

Oh fuck… You want more than anything to tell everyone else to leave so that you can- No. Bad John. Maybe that stuff was even stronger than you thought.

You ignore the still-functioning part of your mind that says they told you this would happen, that it always happens when you go adventuring with someone. …That deep down part of you was kind of hoping it would.

"Yeah, it's dumb," you say, "Let's go home." Then you try to stand and the entire world lurches to the left. Thank all the gods they gave you a table here to hold onto. That was great of them. You take a deep breath and manage to get something like your balance back.

You walk over to Karkat and offer him your hand. He accepts it and with more effort than it really ought to take you help him to his feet. The two of you kind of stumble into each other, but you stay mostly vertical. Yay! He's leaning on you more than a little. He's so warm…

Vriska, who's definitely more sober than either of you, helps you out the back entrance. You insist that you can make it back to the inn from there. Honestly, that's probably not the best idea, but you don't care very much. You'd rather be alone with Karkat.

Staying mostly on the path, you somehow manage not to trip over any gravestones on your way out of the cemetery. The cool night air seems to have sobered Karkat up a little bit, because he's supporting himself a lot more now. But he's still pressed up against you. You want to believe that it's because he doesn't want to leave, but you know better.

Out here you can smell him: not quite elf, not quite human, but absolutely addicting. You wanna bury your nose in his hair. No, don't be weird, John. Focus. Get to the inn, get both of you a big cup of water, go to sleep.

Ignore the part of sleeping that involves pressing up against him. Ignore. Ignore!

"John?" He says.

"It's okay," you say.

"I… I think… I d'lhag lo."

"Donno what that means, but we're gonna get you to bed, buddy."

He opens his mouth and then closes it again, perplexed look on his face. Oh wow, is that a pout? So cute!

…How are you going to handle being in a bed with him? Well, you better figure it out fast because you're there. You get the door open and carefully navigate up the ladder-stairs… thing. And honestly it's a miracle one of you doesn't slip off and get stuck. But, no, you make it to your room safe and sound and Karkat closes the door behind you.

And then you're alone. Together. In a bedroom. And then Karkat takes his shirt off.

Ugh, why does this feel dirty all of a sudden? You have to turn around, and as it is you feel like your face is on fire. Come on, get a hold of yourself, John. You've seen him naked half a dozen times already! Just because you're drunk doesn't mean it has to be any different. Does it? No, that's dumb.
Your clothing winds up mixed up in a pile on top of the trunk. He pours a cup of water and holds it out for you.

"Here," he says.

He's still not making eye contact. Maybe it's because he trusts you to take it? Or maybe he's feeling awkward too? …Or maybe he's just exhausted and you're over thinking things. Gods, just drink and go to bed. You slam your water and lie down facing the wall.

Karkat joins you a moment later. You startle a little when his arm goes around your waist, and he just mutters some unintelligible and horrifically slurried mix of Cyrodiilic and Dunmeri. Gah, of course you're spooning. It's a small bed and he'd fall off otherwise. But he's warm and solid pressed against your back like this, and you can feel his chest expand and contract with every breath he takes.

It's probably wrong, and definitely not quite fair to him, but you sincerely hope this moment never ends.

Two days later, you're heading back to the bee and barb loaded down with your new supplies when Vriska appears out of nowhere, casually leaning against a pole.

"So," she says, in her drawn out sing-songy sort of way, "I heard you and John are going to be leaving soon."

"What's it to you?" You ask.

"Oh, Karkat, can't I be concerned for an old friend?"

"Is that what we are?"

"Of course!"

"If I remember right the two of us never got along that well."

"Maybe but we both know that it's because we're so alike and you don't want to admit it."

"That's a load of yack shit and you know it."

"Reeeeeeeally now?" She smirks.

"What's with the look?" You demand, "I'm not the one who spends all their time obsessing over someone who doesn't want me."

"Oh? Is that why you're still wearing that necklace?"

You freeze.

"Yeah, I noticed. I can see the chain, idiot. If you're telling the truth about just wanting money, the Amulet of Edelkreps is worth quite a lot. I'm sure the guild could help you find the right buyer…"

"It's useful, okay?!" Your hand flies to your chest, covering the amulet. "And at least I don't go around lying to strangers to get them to join crime syndicates."

"Oh relax. I never lied to John anyway. Mindfang wanted the ring, so it belonged to her. That's just how this town operates. Sure, maybe it was a lie of omission, but I'm hardly the only one guilty of
that kind of thing am I?"

"Is that why you came to find me? To blackmail me into giving you my amulet? Because if so it's not going to work."

You prepare to strut off, but then she says "We paid of your bounty."

"What?!"

"You're free to return to Eastmarch if you'd like."

You glower at her, trying desperately to get a read on what she's planning. "And what's in it for you?"

"Consider it a friendly favor."

"So you want me in your debt so you can cash in later," You respond flatly.

"Oh, Karkat, I don't remember you being so cynical."

"Yeah, well, oddly enough people change when they're forced into exile."

She snorts. "Okay, if you so need me to demand something in return, just deliver a message for me."

You narrow your eyes and really hope she's not about to ask you to paint someone's house with chicken blood. "What kind of message?"

"If you happen to come across her, and I have the feeling you will, tell Terezi all is forgiven."

"S-she's alive?"

Vriska laughs. "Oh come on, Karkat! This is Terezi we're talking about! Did you think a wound like that would keep her down for long? Given, she's a bit worse for the wear, but very much alive."

You swallow, "I can do that."

"Good." She turns around. "Oh, and by the way, take your own damn advice. I'd act fast if I were you. If you don't make a move on John soon, I'm pretty sure someone else is going to."

You're not sure if she had anything else to say, but you leave before she has the chance.

---

Anonymous asked you:

JOHN NO YOU BUTT, THE THIEVES GUILD WORKS FOR MEENAH. VRISKA'S A BIG LYING BUTT FART DON'T LISTEN TO HER YOU'D END UP WORKING FOR MEENAH AND YOU DON'T WANT TO WORK FOR HER.

---

john: …
john: no.

john: she’s good deep down. i can tell, i know it. and i’d rather trust someone like her than someone who won’t even show me their face. and what’s wrong with working for meenah? i already knew she runs the thieves guild anyway. but they’re at least taking care of the people. the guards around here are corrupt enough that i’d already noticed before i even talked to vriska.

john: even karkat mostly agreed with what she said.

KARKAT: I TAUGHT HIM HOW TO PICK LOCKS ON OUR FIRST BANDIT RAID. THE FIRST TIME HE WENT THROUGH 13 PICKS ON A NOVICE LOCK.

john: shhhhhh!

john: *smiles* i am a man of many talents, anon.

john: he’s actually really tough! he’s told me he really takes more after his dad’s side, but i can see some nord in him. he’s pinker, broader, and a little taller than most dark elves i’ve seen. (of course, so are most of the dark elves around here. i’m not sure if it’s just that most of them are from a different part of morrowind or if karkat’s not the first hybrid in skyrim. it might be both)

john: but, honestly, i think a lot of it’s just him. he can really take a hit, but a lot of times after big battles he just kind of collapses. i’m pretty sure most of that extra health is made of pure will. he must have a lot of experience too, because he’s covered in scars.

john: one of these days i want to know where they all came from. he still doesn’t like to talk about windhelm that much.

Chapter End Notes
Translations:

Snippet with the Argonian:
"Mih paka c'ahuth naktis Windhelm-di," = "My father is a friend of the connected [Argonians] in Windhelm."
"Kosuxh." = Really. (literally "i am not certain this is factual")
"See Kankrihuth-sinha. Ulfric see thdei." I am Kankri’s son. Ulfric chased me away. But I am stubborn.

Meenah’s question: "ohn marghan ist?" = "will you attack [have sex with] that?"
sundas 31st last seed, 4e201

we left riften today, but we're still nowhere near windhelm. it's almost as far as it was from whiterun to riften, but there aren't really any towns on the mountain roads. after we were a couple miles out of riften we didn't see another person for the rest of the day. so karkat and i talked a lot about eastmarch today and he told me some stuff about what it's like in windhelm, like how the city is set up and who's important, but i feel like he was purposefully leaving parts out? i guess it's only fair. hermaeus knows i haven't told him everything about myself. (although i did tell him some more stuff today. little details of the castle and some stories about my dad and cousins. the nice fun ones.)

we made it to a dwarven ruin called mzulft before it got too dark, and we set up camp just inside this storeroom. there were a whole bunch of dwarven ingots along with this weird shiny blue thing, so hopefully we'll have some easy cash once we get to town.

karkat really wanted to explore the ruins. i'm not sure why. he doesn't usually get this excited over things. it was kind of weird, but i liked seeing that side of him. we were planning on heading in tomorrow since it was getting kind of late, but it turns out that we need a key neither of us could find. he seemed kinda mopey after that, but he perked up a bit after dinner.

he picked up a deck of cards in riften and he says he's going to teach me how to play a game called dragon’s fang, which is apparently the skyrim version of poker, once we finish writing in our journals. it should be a lot of fun!

- i was wrong.

i was so very wrong. everything started fine and normal. we split up the stuff we were carrying for fake betting, but then i just kept losing and losing and i got a little carried away.

all i have left is my shift, my pants, and half a loaf of bread. karkat’s wearing my armor and even has my glasses on his head. i hate this game.

MORNDAS 1ST HEARTFIRE 4E201
SO YESTERDAY NIGHT I FOUND OUT JOHN SUCKS AT CARDS. HE DIDN'T WANT TO GIVE UP SO HE STARTED BETTING LITERALLY EVERYTHING HE HAD ON HIM. AND HE STARTED USING HIS CLOTHES. I KNOW WE'VE SEEN EACH OTHER NAKED BEFORE, BUT THAT WAS DIFFERENT. THAT WAS BECAUSE WE NEEDED TO BATHE OR CHANGE AND JUST SITTING IN A ROOM WITH HIM WHILE HE'S COMPLETELY UNDRESSED...

I KNOW HOW AWKWARD I GET, AND EVEN IF I DIDN'T WANT TO MAKE A COMPLETE SKEEVER OF MYSELF ALL I COULD THINK OF WAS WHAT VRISKA SAID. BUT FUCK, THE TIME WASN'T RIGHT. AND BESIDES, I'M STILL NOT ENTIRELY SURE IF IT'S MY HEART OR MY DICK THAT'S RUNNING THIS SHOW. STILL, I WAS DISTRACTED ENOUGH THAT HE FINALLY WON AND THEN HE WAS ALL BOUNCY AND EXCITED BUT HAPPY TO CALL IT QUITS.

THANKFULLY, HE DIDN'T MENTION IT THIS MORNING. WE JUST GOT UP AND LEFT. AND WE DIDN'T GET MURDERED THE MOMENT THE FIRST GUARD SAW US, WHICH MEANS VRISKA WASN'T LYING ABOUT PAYING OFF MY BOUNTY. SO THAT'S SOMETHING.

THEY PROBABLY STILL WOULDN'T HAVE LET ME THROUGH THE FRONT GATES, THOUGH, SO WE WENT DOWN TO THE DOCKS. A LOT OF THE REGULARS ACTUALLY SEEMED *HAPPY* TO SEE ME. IT WAS KIND OF NICE.

BUT THEN KANKRI SHOWED UP. FOR A SECOND I THOUGHT HE WAS GOING TO BREAK HIS “NO TOUCHING” RULE AND HUG ME. INSTEAD HE WENT ON A RANT OF HOW COULD I LEAVE LIKE THAT, THEY THOUGHT I WAS DEAD, OUR FATHER WILL BE FURIOUS, BLAH BLAH BLAH.

HE KEPT GOING AND GOING AND GOING SO I JUST LED JOHN INSIDE BUT KANKRI FOLLOWED AND KEPT RANTING AT US. WE WANDERED THROUGH THE GRAY QUARTER (IT'S A LOT SMALLER THAN I REMEMBER IT BEING), AND I ANSWERED ABOUT FIFTY BILLION STUPID QUESTIONS FROM JOHN. OR I TRIED TO. AS OFTEN AS NOT KANKRI VERBALLY ELBOWED ME OUT OF THE CONVERSATION. I'M NOT SURE IF HE ACTUALLY BECAME MORE OF A DICK SINCE I LEFT, OR IF I WAS JUST REMEMBERING WRONG BECAUSE HE'S MY BROTHER SO I WANT HIM NOT TO BE A COMPLETE DICKMUNCH.

I THINK JOHN IS STARTING TO REALIZE WHAT AN AWFUL PLACE THIS IS. HE SAID HE WANTED TO EXPLORE THE REST OF THE CITY ALONE. I'M WAITING AT GNISIS UNTIL HE GETS BACK. I FIGURE IT'LL BE EASY ENOUGH FOR HIM TO FIND, AND KANKRI REFUSES TO COME IN.

I HOPE HE'S ALRIGHT. BEING AN IMPERIAL IN THIS PLACE HAS TO BE WORSE THAN BEING A DUNMER THESE DAYS.

I STILL HAVEN'T SEEN DAD YET. I WONDER WHAT HE'S UP TO...

You leave Karkat behind at a tavern and step out into the narrow street. The crumbling walls feel like they're closing in around you, and the ever-more-precarious second, third, and even forth story additions reaching out over the street don't help. There are banners up, but they're torn and dirty, and the pigments, which you think used to be reds and yellows, have all gone to a sort of muted
brown. You understand why Karkat didn't want to come back.

It's not like the rest of the city is much better either. Yeah, it's less built up than the gray quarter, but the buildings are still cramped and in desperate need of attention. You're not sure the city walls have had proper maintenance in over a hundred years. Dad would have a heart attack if he got within a mile of this place.

About half of the people rush around with heads down and hoods up like they're trying to be indistinguishable from one another if not out and out invisible. The other half, mostly the tall bearded nord men, strut around with an air of confidence that makes you sick. How can they act so proud when their city's like this?! For fuck's sake, there was a dead woman stripped naked and dumped in an alley and the guards don't seem to care. They're too busy talking about the war and telling you to watch your back. It feels more like a threat than a warning. Oh Akatosh, you wish you had your old hammer. It would at least help you feel a little safer.

Or even better, you wish they weren't rebelling against the empire. Because even if the Jarls are about equal to counts and so you're totally outranked, you feel like you have to try something. Like, you might at least be able to convince him to let someone take a look at his books and figure out what in Oblivion he's doing. As it is, when you find the Palace of the Kings (in the relatively well-maintained part of town. Figures), you debate trying to pull the same thing except with the dragonborn card.

No, that'd probably just cause more problems. You take a deep breath and are about to walk away when the doors open and a pair of guards throw a dark elf out into the street, shouting insults after him. The elf manages to keep his face from smacking the cobblestones, but that's about it. He lands hard on the ground and skids a few inches forward.

"Oh man, are you okay?" You rush over to help him to his feet.

"It's fine," he says, pushing himself up off the ground. "This isn't the first time they've thrown me out and I'm certain it won't be the last."

He dusts himself off and smiles at you. You're really bad at guessing how old elves are, but if he was human you'd guess late thirties or early forties because he has light wrinkles around his eyes and his temples are starting to gray. He look an awful lot like Karkat, with the same little round nose and big expressive eyes. You wonder if they're related or if those are just common traits around here.

"Anyway, I should probably introduce myself. The humans around here call me Kankri Vantas."

Well, that answers that question. "Oh my gosh! You're Karkat's dad, aren't you? I'm John Egbert by the way. Hi!"

He looks away sadly. "I see. Did you know him?"

"Did I know him? We've been travelling together since Helgen."

His eyes go wide. "What? I was told there were no survivors!"

You smile. "Well, I can tell you there's at least two."

"You said you were travelling together? Where is he?"

"He's at the um… uh… what's that bar called again?"
"Gnisis?"

"Yeah! That one!"

He takes off nearly at a run.

"Hey, wait!"

You try to tail him through the streets, it's but easier said than done. He's quick, he knows exactly where he's going, and since he's a little on the short side he keeps threatening to disappear into the crowd. You have to keep your eyes fixed on him so that you don't get lost. Oh, Stendarr no, that would be so embarrassing.

Thankfully, you manage to follow Mr. Vantas all the way to the tavern. He throws the door open and then pauses. The barkeeper looks up at him and smiles.

"Hello, Shokhosbahr. He's upstairs."

Mr. Vantas chuckles. "Oh, of course he is." He moves more slowly now, almost hesitant as he heads into the back.

Karkat is exactly where you left him, sitting at a little table in the corner on the second floor. He's finished writing in his journal and has picked up a small battered book. He glances up and then startles so hard he almost falls out of his chair.

"By the nine…" Mr. Vantas says, "It is you."

"Ati, I-" Karkat says, getting to his feet.

Mr. Vantas crosses the room and embraces him tightly. "Shh," He says. He kisses Karkat hard on the forehead and then starts petting his hair, murmuring something or other, probably in Dunmeri. Well whatever it was, it was probably important because you see tears welling up in Karkat's eyes.

You feel the need to look away. You may have been in all of Karkat's business for a little while now, but this feels like it ought to be private. This is family stuff and you're a friend at best. After a few moments, you glance back over, and Mr. Vantas is looking up at his son with the kind of absolute unconditional love that only a parent can have. It's too much, so you focus on Karkat, who's happy but still somewhat uneasy. Mr. Vantas goes up on his tiptoes to kiss him again.

And then the other shoe drops. He pushes Karkat out to arm's length and starts yelling at him in Dunmeri.

"I know I should have told you I was coming, but I've been busy!"

He keeps yelling.

"Yes, I've been too busy to write!"

Ugh, insert more foreign language here.

"Ata! It's not like that! It's not!"

"Karkat," Mr. Vantas says, followed by something softer and sadder.

"I'm sorry, Ati…"
Mr. Vantas shakes his head and runs his fingers through Karkat's hair again. "Oh, ju'ki..." He sighs. "Are you and your friend hungry? We should go get you dinner, and then you will tell me everything."

tirdas 2nd heartfire, 4e201

so karkat's dad is super nice and says we’re welcome to stay in his house as long as we’d like, so at least we don’t have to pay for an inn. after we met up with him yesterday we went to get food but that took a lot longer than i was thinking. he had about a million questions for karkat, and a few for me too. the way he's talking makes it seem like karkat hasn't even stopped by in a while, but i still haven't figured out why. by the time we actually got back to his house karkat and i could barely stumble into bed we were so tired.

right now he and karkat are talking quietly about something on the other side of the room. i want to know what they're saying, but it's probably family stuff. also the odds are good that even if i could hear clearly they're speaking dunmeri, even if it's technically similar to aldmeri and they have some of the same words, the accent is so different i don't understand anything they say.

karkat said once it gets really late he’s going to take me somewhere there’s a great view of the northern lights. i’m really excited! i’d only seen them once or twice before coming to skyrim and i’ve never gotten a really good look. and this place is out over the harbor! honestly, i'm still not over the ocean or the northern lights, but karkat's seen them since he was a kid so if he says the view is good, it must be.

The two of you sit atop Windhelm's eastern wall, looking out over the docks. Some people are still working, illuminated by a handful of torches, but most of them went home ages ago. John is absolutely transfixed. He stares out over the water, mesmerized by the lights and the way they reflect on the sea below. And it's all very pretty, but nothing you haven't seen dozens of times before. To be honest you enjoy looking at him more. He smiles brightly as he stares out over the water, unselfconscious and full of wonder. Happiness all but radiates off of him, and it makes you smile right back.

"Oh Mara, thank you so much Karkat." He says. "This is absolutely amazing."

"I'm glad you like it. Took me forever to figure out how to get up here." Ugh, good job, Karkat. Way to sound like a bag of dicks.

But he laughs. "Well, I'm glad you did. Gods, there's not even words for this. When I look way out there I almost forget which way is up." He takes a deep breath, "I- it's kind of like how I feel when I'm with you."

Wait, what? His words hit you like a verbal blow to the stomach. You whip your head around and look at him. He didn't mean it like that. He can't have meant it like that. But he's looking away nervously and nibbling at his lower lip. And it's hard to tell (curse that flawless, beautiful dark skin and the low light), but you think he's blushing. You open and close your mouth a few times, but you can't think of anything to say that wouldn't irreparably fuck everything up. So instead you just put your hand over his.

He turns to look at you with those brilliant blue eyes. He doesn't say anything, just looks at you with mouth slightly agape, like he's surprised you're actually interested. Fuck, he's beautiful, so your brain cuts out and words just start tumbling out of your mouth. Making plenty of room for you to insert your foot. Great. "I never realized how awful it was travelling by myself until I met
you. When the dragon attacked Helgen, I lost everything, but I felt better than I had in years. Off and on I wondered to myself why I was going with you and I couldn't think of anything besides the fact that I couldn't bear to leave. And of course you're incredibly handsome but I generally don't lose it just because someone's hot because let's be honest tons of people are super hot so there had to be something else. I guess I just really, really, really started liking you really fast and it kind of scares me and I should probably throw myself off the wall now, right?"

John throws his head back and laughs, and it would be proving your point if it weren't for the fact that he's obviously not mocking you. Instead, the laugh is pure and light and just so happy that you can't not laugh along.

When he stops he looks at you with a tenderness that makes your heart clench. Suddenly you feel about five years younger, small and anxious and full of desire but not sure how to proceed. He starts leaning towards you just a little bit. It's a tiny movement, almost imperceptible, but that look in his eyes... Oh, fuck everything. You just throw your arms around his shoulders and kiss him.

It's not the best kiss you've ever had. He's a little stiff, uncertain. Shit, you probably weren't supposed to- You pull away. But then he grabs you by the shirt and pulls you back towards him.

This time is better. He's still stiff, but maybe it's just because he hasn't had much practice (maybe it's unfair of you, but you hope he hasn't had much practice). Your head is at a bit of a different angle, which helps you fit together a lot better (as adorable as you've come to find his nose, it is still a bit of an obstacle). He wraps his arms around you too, and this time you can ignore the stiffness, ignore the unsteadiness, because what you feel more than anything is the emotion he's pouring into you.

You need him more than anything, and you need this never to end. You wish you could just melt into him and never, ever have to leave. Then he backs off.

"Karkat? Are you okay? Why are you crying?"

Aw shit, not this again. You hadn't even noticed. You sniffle. "D-don't worry about it."

"Karkat..." he looks at you earnestly and you have to break eye contact. Dammit, you were doing so well at keeping your cool too.

"I cry when I get emotional," You say to your legs. "It happens." Sniff. "I can't do anything about it."

"Holy shit, Karkat, you are the cutest thing. Seriously, how did I get by without you?"

You look back up at him and raise one eyebrow. "It's okay to say I ugly cry. I know I do."

"It's cute." He says firmly. He gently brushes your hair back and wipes your tears away. And it's so tender, so sweet that it just makes you break out into bigger, messier sobs.

He laughs again, just sweet and happy. "Awww, come here, you."

This time he just hugs you, but the way he presses his cheek to yours is almost more intimate.

Yeah, okay, this is not at all how you pictured your first date to go. But as he gently rubs your back you wouldn't trade it for the world.
You've given up on wandering around the city with Karkat. Honestly, while there's plenty to do, you don't like how you're treated in the Nord parts of the city and you feel like too much of an outsider in the gray quarter. But the Vantas's house is reasonably comfortable and they have plenty of books, even if they are cheaply printed editions. No, for now Karkat can deal with people he knows, and you can give yourself a break.

Although, to be fair, break is a bit of a relative term. You feel kind of bad sitting around and doing nothing, so you help Mr. Vantas with a few chores around the house. In the early afternoon, Karkat heads out to see some woman they call Baralma, leaving you alone with his father.

"So," Mr. Vantas says, as soon as the door shuts. "I hear Karkat's plan to get you alone on the wall worked."

You startle so hard you nearly drop the potato you're trying to peel. "How did you-"

"I'm in the business of knowing things. But in this particular case, I'll give you a tip," he stops cutting vegetables to glance over at you. "If you ever get the feeling Karkat's hiding something from you and you want to find out what it is, sit him down and scratch his scalp. He pretty much melts. Gets it from his mother."

"Huh," you say.

Mr. Vantas stares at you silently, and even if he's being subtle you can tell he's analyzing every inch of you.

Fuck, you need to say something. "I-is it a problem? Me being with Karkat?" You finally ask.

"Not as such." He glides over to the table and sits around the corner from you. "You seem like a good man, and I get the feeling you're being sincere about your kindness and sense of honor. It's obvious that you already care for Karkat very deeply, even if you've only known him a couple of weeks. That being said, I would be a fool to approach the situation with no suspicion or concern whatsoever. Perhaps it's difficult for someone your age to understand, but my children are my world."

Oh, you see where this is going. "I won't hurt him," You say, trying to soothe him before the threat comes out.

Mr. Vantas chuckles darkly. "Oh, but you will. Even if somehow you manage to completely avoid the friction that appears whenever two people get close enough – which, knowing my son, is highly unlikely. He has too much fire inside of him to let things lie – misfortune visits everyone time to time. You will get injured; you will get sick; you will lose loved ones. To love someone with your whole heart is to make their pain your own, and Karkat never does anything half way. Furthermore, your profession is not a particularly safe one, as I'm sure you know."

"I'll protect him," you say. "As well as I can, I mean."

"I know you will. And I must admit I'm much happier with him adventuring now that he has a companion, especially one as fearsome as a member of House Egbert. A proper battlemage is better than I had any right to hope for."

"Did he tell you about that too?"

"He didn't have to. If you're trying to hide who you are you have a long way to go. To be honest, John, you're textbook: tall, dark for an imperial, large nose, wears spectacles, and has a four letter name starting with a 'J.' Also, between what happens to your accent when you get serious and the
way you carry yourself you were obviously raised in a noble household in Cyrodiil, and the Egberts are the only ones who regularly send their children off to face death on a daily basis."

"You make it sound super obvious, but you're the first person in Skyrim who's noticed."

"As I said, it's my business to know things. It's what I do."

"I guess I wasn't really expecting… Karkat made it sounds like you were… um…” You blush.

"Heh, Karkat would focus on that bit, wouldn't he? No, I won't deny that there's a lot of sex involved. You'd be amazed the things people will admit to in bed. Between that and the political favors that can be attained when one literally has someone by the balls, a little bit of properly applied seduction goes a long way for an information broker. I may not be proud of some of the things I had to do, but I was able to keep my sons fed and clothed by myself. And that I am proud of.

"But, this is not about me. We were discussing the fact that Karkat is entrusting you with his heart. He's fully grown by half-elf standards so he can make his own choices, and if I raised him right, which I like to think I did, you probably deserve that trust. But on the off-chance you don't…”

He grabs the front of your shirt and pulls you forward so your faces are only inches apart. His blood-red eyes are just like Karkat's, but the emotion behind it is completely different. Where Karkat would be snarling and growling, all teeth and claws and fire, Mr. Vantas is calm and collected and pure ice. It's that composed evenness that scares you more than anything, because it means he knows what he's doing, that whatever threat comes next will be followed through. Your instincts are screaming at you to run, your training telling you to grab your peeling knife and hold it to his throat, but you just sit there, entrapped by those eyes.

When he speaks again his voice is low and soft. "There are many ways to destroy a man's life without violence. I doubt I'd be able to kill you in combat, no matter how I rigged the fight. But if you are ever needlessly cruel or do anything to purposefully harm my baby, I will use every skill at my disposal to fucking annihilate you. Are we clear?"

"Y-yes sir," you sputter out.

"Good," he smiles softly and lets you go. "And thanks for peeling the potatoes, by the way. You've been a big help." He takes the pot and brings it over to the fire.

Holy fucking Akatosh. And you thought your dad could be scary.

fredas, 5th heartfire, 4e201

hard to believe we’ve been here almost a week already. it’s so easy to get pulled back out of adventure and back into the mundane. thankfully, even though we're dating now sharing a bed still isn't too weird. that would make travelling together hard once it starts getting cold. actually, come to think of it, it feels less awkward now that i know he likes me back. now i don't have to worry that i’m taking advantage of him and it doesn’t feel weird if we wake up clinging to each other.

karkat showed me some more places around windhelm, introduced me to some of the friends that were still there. it was nice just spending time with him, chilling out and getting to know him outside of battling and walking for hours on end. we even got to go on a few more dates. i’ve never felt like this before. i just want to give him everything he wants. after a few more quests we should
have enough money to get that house in whiterun. i’m planning to let him have it to himself once we do. but i… i guess i’m selfish but i really hope he changes his mind. i don’t want to say goodbye. i know i’ll have to eventually, but i don’t think i’m ready yet.

i know for sure he’s hiding something big. everyone is just so ‘happy he’s alive’ after ‘what happened.’ no one’s telling me anything, but i get the feeling it’s not just helgen. i wanna know more about him, but then i’ll have to tell him about me. maybe if i have a heart to heart with him about the colonel… but it’ll probably scare him away, and i don’t want that.

we were planning to pack up and start heading out when mr. vantas inherited a new house. apparently one of the wealthier elves died. (fairly suddenly too. but he was in his late two hundreds, so they’re pretty sure it was natural.) he wasn’t married and didn’t have any kids, so he apparently gave mr. vantas like all his stuff. karkat was kind of pissed because he was worried that some nieces and nephews would try to challenge the will, but no one did. after that he wanted to stay and help his family move, so we did. this new place sure is big! there are three separate bedrooms and two of them have double beds. kankri took the single for now, which is nice because now karkat and i can actually spread out. we’ve been staying here for two days now, helping them get settled in.

we head out tomorrow. for real this time.

---

You aren't so sure you like the house. It's too quiet. Everyone keeps saying that it's because it's new, because it's too young to settle or for the wind to find cracks to slip through. But there's nothing to fully drown out the whispers. They're almost overpowering with nothing else to focus on. Fuck, you're pretty sure you'll go crazy if you get left alone here. Well... crazier, anyway. It's a good thing you have Karkat so that his soft stores and occasional murmurings help keep the silence at bay.

Shit, what was that? No, it's nothing, you tell yourself. It's too quiet, so you're making up noises like the rustling of cloth or new low whispers. But once or twice you swear you hear soft honking? You have no idea where you would have come up with that. You curl up right against Karkat, hoping being in closer proximity to him will help get dispel the illusions.

But they don't. You roll onto your back and open your eyes, trying to prove to yourself there's nothing there. Except there is. A pair of bright red eyes shine down at you in the darkness. You want to scream, but instead you just freeze. All you can do is slowly move your hand and shake Karkat awake.

He opens his eyes, groans, and then reaches out towards the figure above you. Then there's a thud and the assailant is on the ground with Karkat's fingers gripping his hair tightly. Shit, where's your hammer?

"John, can you do the light thing?" Karkat asks calmly.

"Uh, yeah…" You cast magelight, and the room fills with its eerie bluish glow.

The dark elf on the floor is tall and lanky with long, hair wild and messy even far away from where Karkat’s has his fingers buried in it. But you recognize his armor. Fuck, it’s the dark brotherhood. Someone’s sent assassins after you. But Karkat looks totally calm. He pulls his hand away and crosses his arms. The elf smiles up at you dazedly.
“You know, Gamzee,” Karkat says, “Normal people have this fucking bizarre behavior called ‘knocking’ and ‘coming during the day instead of watching people sleep.’”

“Aw brother, don’t be like that. I heard you was all up in town, so after dealing with the Aretino kid’s contract I just wanted to motherfucking drop on by and say hello.”

Karkat rolls his eyes. “I can't fucking believe you.”

"Hey, you gonna introduce me to your friend?"


“What’s up, my brother?” Gamzee asks, waving lazily.

“Uh, hi.”

“Anyway,” Gamzee says, turning back to Karkat, “I heard you were getting your motherfucking travel on. Want a horse?”

“What?” Karkat asks.

“You want a horse?”

“No, I heard you, you fucking idiot. What I mean is why in the name of Boethiah’s asshole are you offering me your goddamn horse?”

Gamzee gets to his feet. “Well, you know me.” A split second later he's sitting on the edge of the bed. “I can motherfucking shadowstep from here back to Dawnstar in a few minutes. When I got the Listener job they gave me a motherfucking demon horse, but I never fucking get to use him. So you want him? Kurloz would ride him sometimes, but now that motherfucker is so busy weeding out applicants he don't ever leave the sanctuary. Cal told me I could give him away to someone trustworthy, so here I fucking am.”

Karkat sighs. “If we take the damn thing will you let us go to sleep?”

Instead of saying anything, he just honks and grins.

“Alright. We'll take it. Now get out of here, you stupid clown.”

“You got it brother. He’s the one who looks like a motherfucking demon horse, all big and black with glowing red eyes. Answers to Shadowmere. Oh, and if you motherfuckers are ever up in Dawnstar look me up. If I ain’t out getting my murder on I’ll be in the sanctuary. It’s past a creepy as fuck black door. It’ll be all like ‘what’s life’s greatest illusion?’ And if you go ‘innocence, my brother’ you’re in. I tried to change it to ‘motherfucking magnets,’ but Cal put his little floppy foot down. Anyway, we got some wicked-ass skooma up in that bitch. I’m sure I can get Kurloz to share.”

“Yeah, that’s not doing anything to convince me. But we probably will head that way at some point. Now get the fuck out of here.”

He honks happily again and vanishes.

You turn to Karkat, “What. The fuck. Just happened?”

“Um, yeah… Gamzee Makara just happened. He tends to do that sometimes.”
“Yeah, but who actually is he?”

“He’s a skooma addicted clown.”

"There's got to be more than that."

"Okay, he's also an incredible fighter, absurdly competent assassin, Listener of the Dark Brotherhood, and one of the most intelligent people I ever met. When he's sober, that is.”

“And he just dropped by to give us a horse?”

Karkat shrugs. “We were friends for a long time.”

“But out of your apparently gigantic group of friends he picked you?”

“Well,” He replies, looking away. "Okay, maybe we were more than just friends.”

“You used to date an assassin?”

“We weren’t that serious okay? Look, when you're in exile you get lonely and you know what they say, how in two months of travelling together if you're not related you're kissing. I mean, look at us for fuck's sake! Besides, we broke up when he really got into the killing thing.”

“Wow.” you lean back against the headboard. “First thieves, now assassins…”

“They're not all like that!” Karkat snaps. “I mean, I have friends in the Companions too. And in Winterhold. We just haven’t run into them yet. And to be fair, it’s not like some of us had a lot of choice.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugs. "Only so many things for a Dunmer to do in Skyrim. Irileth’s the only one I’ve met to work for a good house, but we’ve all gotta eat."

You want to push. What did he mean about that? What did he mean about exile? But if you ask, Karkat will do the same and… that doesn't strike you as a good idea. The light fades and you lie down and try to go back to sleep.

john: that’s a good question! i mean, it wouldn’t be an issue in cyrodiil, but i don’t know how different things are here.

KARKAT: IT’S NOT REALLY MUCH OF A BIG DEAL. MOST PEOPLE ARE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT SURVIVING THE WAR AND GETTING READY FOR WINTER THAN ANYONE’S DATING LIFE.
KARKAT: WE MIGHT GET A FEW ODD LOOKS BECAUSE OF THE MAN-MER THING, BUT NO ONE WILL SAY ANYTHING. WE’RE ABOUT THE SAME AGE, LOOK LIKE WE’RE THE SAME CLASS, AND UNMARRIED, SO IT’S NOT THAT WEIRD. BESIDES, MOST OF THE PEOPLE IN THE EAST WOULD HATE JOHN FOR BEING AN IMPERIAL EVEN MORE THAN THEY HATE ME FOR BEING A DUNMER.

KARKAT: THE ISSUE WITH ME WASN’T THAT I'M A HALF-ELF. IT’S THAT MY MOM WAS MARRIED TO SOMEONE ELSE AND HER RICH AND POWERFUL HUSBAND WAS REALLY ADAMANT THAT MY DAD WASN'T A LEGAL CONSORT. BUT IT’S NOT EXACTLY LIKE THE TWO OF US HAVE THE RIGHT PARTS TO ACCIDENTALLY MAKE A BABY, SO IT'LL BE FINE.

---

**little-tiger01 asked you:**

Hay, have you thought about taking a trip to Morthal, Falkreath, or Winterhold? Those places may be small towns, but are easy to settle in to, and the people tend to be nice. Winterhold would be cold, but it does have the Mages' Collage, Kar seems like he'd be good at magic-y things - John could figure out (windy) stuff, or learn how to enchant the shit out of things just to mess with kk... because he's the prankster. It was John (I'm som1 who just wants to see kk burn John then give him frostbite)

---

KARKAT: ACTUALLY, WE’RE HEADING TO WINTERHOLD NEXT.

john: yeah! i’m kind of excited to see the college!

KARKAT: WHY? YOU NEVER EVEN USE MAGIC.

john: …sometimes i do. it’s just you have to put the hammer down to use it.

KARKAT: WHATEVER. YOU CAN GO, BUT I’LL BE STAYING IN THE TOWN WHEN YOU DO. MAGIC’S SUCH A WASTE OF TIME. AND MAGES ARE LITTLE SHITS.

john: ha! you are such a nord sometimes!

KARKAT: SHH, SHH, SHH, DO YOU HEAR THAT?

john: hear what?

KARKAT: THE SOUND OF YOU SHUTTING THE FUCK UP BECAUSE NOBODY CARES.

john: pfft, okay, karkat.

---

Translation notes:
Shokhosbahr: Literally "no sign," more figuratively meaning a person who is stealthy and/or graceful (leaving no marks where they go). Upon reaching full adulthood in Dunmer society (the exact age one is considered a full adult varies, because it's based upon when a person is established in their career. Usually this is late twenties or early thirties) people are given a second public name which usually suggests a place in society or profession. Their birth names are then considered private names, only to be used by family or close friends. Other cultures, especially humans sometimes have trouble with this, but the people of Windhelm explicitly refuse to use or accept the titles.

Ata/Ati: Father/dad. Ata is considered more formal and impersonal, a switch to using this often signals displeasure.

Ju'ki: Diminutive of julekil, meaning son.

Baralma: Literally "over mother." Title for a woman whose job is to teach and care for children, usually between the ages of five and fourteen. An enclave the size of the Gray Quarter would have several BaralmaaS or Barataas, who are distinguished by family name if there's a question. Karkat meant Baralma Maryam, or the Dolorosa.
So you have a horse now. And it’s terrifying. You’ve never been on a horse in your life, and this one is... yeah, "motherfucking demon horse" pretty much covers it. The monster is almost seven feet tall at the shoulder, with fur like burnt timbers, glowing red eyes, and an aura you can only describe as murderous. Like, you’ve seen plenty of horses, and they're generally pretty gentle creatures but this one feels like it would love to fuck you up. John is giddy, stroking its flank and calling it a good boy as he gets the massive black leather saddle on it. Once everything is secured he somehow manages to hop up onto the monster and then helps pull you up. Thankfully, the saddle is just big enough you both fit when you're pressed up against him, which is... um... His arms come up and takes the reins around you, effectively caging you in. The stable hand gives you a weird look.

“I don’t think we’re supposed to do it like this...” you say.

“Well, it is weird to have two adults on one horse, but it’s a giant immortal demon one so I don’t think we’re gonna hurt it.”

“How do you know it’s immortal?”

Instead of answering he just asks “You don’t mind, do you, boy?” He leans back to pat the thing on its ass and it whinnies and shakes its head. “Besides, otherwise we’d basically just be using him to carry our stuff and that wouldn’t save us any time. If he starts getting tired we can stop.”

“Okay...”

“Alright, let’s do this!” he kicks it and the horse lurches forward

You squawk and grip Shadowmere’s mane tightly. You’re going to die. You are going to fall to your death on a stupid animal and John is laughing at you. Guh, why do you tolerate this asshole?

Okay, Karkat. Deep breaths. You clamp your legs and try sitting upright. Alright, you think maybe you’re getting used to this. There's a rhythm to the movement, and it's just a question of shifting your weight right to keep up. This is fine. Then you get outside the final walls and John nudges the horse into a breakneck gallop. This time you do scream and fall back against John.

“Dude, it’s fine. We’re just cantering.”

“You are trying to kill me. It is absolutely not fine!”

“Okay, okay,” he pulls back a little bit and the horse goes back to a walk. It shakes its head in what you assume is irritation. “Just kind of work on getting used to how he moves.”

“That's what I was doing,” you huff. ”Then somebody decided we were going to sprint all the way to Winterhold!”

You can practically hear him rolling his eyes at you. “Just trust the horse, baby, he doesn’t want to hurt you.”

You snarl, and whip around to face him. “‘Baby?’ What the fuck, dude?”
“Oh, sorry. Does it really bother you?”

“Um, I- I guess it’s could be worse…” your voice drops off into a mumble. "Just kind of surprised me."

“Does that mean it’s okay?” He asks excitedly.

“Just… not in public." 

“Duly noted!” he replies.

A few moments later he takes one hand off the reins.

“W-what are you doing? I’m gonna fall off!”

“Shh, it’s okay.”

He hesitates for just a moment, and then his arm goes around your waist. Oh… This would be really, really nice if he wasn’t wearing iron armor. As it is you’re pressed back kind of awkwardly against a cold, hard breastplate. It should be patronizing. You’re being held like a small child, but… you like the warmth and weight of his arm. And if he's holding you like this you're pretty sure you won't fall off.

So you don’t say anything. You just keep holding onto Shadowmere's mane. This time when he nudges the horse to go a little faster, you adapt. Maybe being pressed up against him like this helps.

But after a couple hours your thighs are killing you. If you could have gone in a straight line you'd be there by now but the stupid road has to curve to avoid the mountains and you don't relish the idea of taking this thing up a steep slope. Eventually you pass the foothills and come out into the tundra. Across the flat ground you see what looks to be a turret on the horizon.

“Hang on, you see that?” You ask, pointing off into the distance.

“Uhhh…” He squints. "There’s a little bump?”

“I think that might be the College.”

“Huh,” he says, pulling the horse to the left and off the main road.

“What are you doing?!” you demand.

“I mean, if we’re going there, shouldn’t we just go there? You were complaining about the road going sideways just, like, a minute ago."

“I guess you have a point…” It's just… The tundra's pretty flat, but not perfectly so. What if the horse accidentally gets its hoof stuck in a burrow? You know for a fact that you will fall off and snap your neck and die.

So you head off over the rocky tundra. You're less than a mile from the road when the wind turns cold and a translucent woman flickers about fifty feet away. Her fingers are long and pointed, her only clothing a ghostly scarf wrapped around her head and chest.

“We should go back,” you say.

“Why?” John asks. "Just because of a ghost?"
"That's not a ghost. It’s a whispmother."

He snorts. “Come on, Karkat, after dragons how bad can it be?” He leaps off the horse and starts running towards it, hammer drawn.

“Shit! Wait a second!”

You try to slide off the horse, but your legs are cramping up so hard you actually stumble to the ground. Eventually, you manage to run after him, even if it’s kind of at a limp. He gets a few hits in, and then it pushes you both back with a massive gust of wind. He swears and tries to rush back forward. Now you’re right by his side, and the two of you are going to go in and-

The whispmother shoots a pair of ice spikes towards the two of you. You manage to lunge to the side, but John is less lucky. He gasps and falls to his knees, one of the bolts embedded just beneath his armpit.

Okay, change of plans. You are getting the fuck out. You put John’s good arm over your shoulders and try to carry him toward Shadowmere. The whispmother keeps shooting spikes at you, but you deflect them with your sickles. Thankfully, the horse seems to somehow understand your plan and trots over to you. It bends down, letting you half throw John over the saddle. And then you run away from the wind and the ice.

You should be out of the storm by now, but you’re not. You look over your shoulder and the creature is only a little bit further away than she was when you started. She’s chasing you. The damn thing is chasing you. But there’s a canyon nearby. And Skyrim horses are supposed to be good at climbing. Right?

The slope is nearly vertical and the gravel crumbles under your feet. Sometimes you and the horse both slide, but you have to keep going. Otherwise John doesn’t have a fucking chance.

Eventually, you get to the base of the canyon. This late in the summer the river’s basically just a muddy rut. You stick to the sides and really hope the horse doesn’t get stuck. There are a few horkers rolling around, but you give them a wide enough berth that they don’t bother you.

When you get near the shore and find a solid patch of ground you stop. The ice spike has long since dissipated and now wound is bleeding freely. You pull him down from the horse and lean him up against the wall. His eyelids flutter up at you without really seeing and he’s breathing heavily.

"You're gonna be okay, John." You stroke his face in what you hope is a comforting manner. If only your voice wasn't so damn shaky. "We're gonna make you better."

He just groans in response. You undo his breastplate and, yeah, that's bad. John needs something on there like yesterday. You search your pouches and… and you forgot to buy more healing potions in town. How could you forget healing potions?!

Shit, you have to have something… anything. You throw the saddlebags open. Please, let John’s stupid collecting habit help for once. You find some blue mountain flowers, a couple butterfly wings, and a bit of wheat. Paydirt. You tear the ingredients apart and throw them in a bowl, but you still need something to activate them. All you have for matrix is what's left in your waterskin. It's probably mostly backwash at this point, but in a pinch it'll have to do. You mix it quickly with your fingers and then pull the sopping ingredients out, pressing them to the wound.

“Come on,” you say, “Come on!”
Then you see the glow. It’s faint at first, but then it gets stronger. His breathing evens out and his face is a little less pained, but his eyes are still closed. John's shift is already ruined, so you cut a wide strip off of it and then wrap it around his middle, keeping the poultice in place.

“Okay,” you tell the horse. “We gotta get him somewhere safe.”

It lets you put John back on it, and then you start leading it forward. There’s a shipwreck not too far ahead. Not the best spot, but there’s no way you’ll find better. No one lives out here.

Or so you think. Then someone goes “What’s that?”

A nord pokes his head out of the ship. “Well, lookit what we got, boys. Looks like for once looks like some prey came to us!”

Oh, fuck your life.

Three men pop out of the boat, weapons drawn. You pull out your sickles but hold your ground. If they get between you and John it could be over for both of you. One of them takes the lead, tearing up to you with a massive orcish warhammer in his hands.

Sidestep. Slice. He falls to the ground, neck gushing blood.

"Next?" You ask.

One of the other two growls, but he approaches you more carefully, shield up. You leap forward and to the side, aiming to stab him in the back. He's just a bit too quick, bashing you with his shield and staggering you. You get your sickles up just in time to block his sword. You kick him in the gut and he falls back. This time you are fast enough and slip your blades between his ribs. He falls to the ground with a strangled cry, ripping your weapons from your hands.

"You're dead, sootskin," the last one growls.

Shit. He's close to you. Too close. You whip around in time to see a raised mace. You dodge, but trip over bandit number one, ending up on the ground. He approaches you, preparing to attack again. And now you've got nothing but leather armor and mud against hard steel.

But, hey, in a pinch… You grab a handful of filth and lob it at his face. He makes a disgusted noise and goes to wipe the mud from his eyes. You don't bother to watch. Instead you get to your feet and bolt past him, grabbing your sickles back out of his comrade's chest.

He's got full steel armor on. You'll never be able to get through it, which means the only way to hurt him would be on the face or neck. And since he has a shield your odds of landing a hit are less than stellar. You try anyway, but he easily blocks and throws you to the ground.

Your neck swings back and your skull cracks against the ground. Pain radiates from the back of your head, but you still try to get yourself to move. You should get up. You need to get up. There's thick fog in your head and it feels like your own thoughts are far away. You slowly push yourself up, but the world spins and you slide back down.

The bandit towers above you and raises his mace.

Come on, Karkat. Move! You try to get up again and your hand slips in the mud.

Then there's an orb of deep blue light flying vaguely in your direction. It envelops the bandit. You hear a scream and then the light explodes outwards. A pile of ghostly remains fall to the ground,
followed by a sweetroll.

You turn in the direction the magic came from. John stands there, leaning heavily on Shadowmere. One hand is still raised, fingers outstretched towards where the bandit leader had just been. His face is pure murder, teeth bared and brows knit together, glaring at the bandit's remains. Blue sparks still dance across his fingertips. His eyes lock onto you, an unearthly glow in them.

Your blood runs cold, and you feel yourself shrink away from him. You feel your heart pounding desperately in your chest. Something about him, something about that look just isn't right.

But then he blinks, and his expression shifts to concern. The weird light is gone and you breathe a bit easier. What the fuck just happened?

He pushes off of the horse and begins walking towards you. "You okay?"

"I'll be alright," you say, "but you should stop. Don't want you to hurt yourself more."

He shakes his head. "I'm good now, thanks to you."

"You sure?" You ask as he offers you a hand.

"Yeah," he replies, pulling you up. "Now come here."

He leans down just a little bit and stares deep into your soul. His eyes are familiar now, their normal warm blue. Must have been some weird light trick. Or the possible concussion. And now he's holding you so tenderly. You close your eyes and lean towards him.

"Karkat? You okay?"

You startle. "Was… was that not where you were going with this?"

"Oh! Haha, I was just checking your pupils. They're the same size, so that's something. That fall looked pretty nasty."

"Right." You look away and blush.

"But," he says, turning your head gently back towards him. "That's a good option too."

This time he does kiss you, his lips soft and sweet. Yes, you like this. You like this a lot. You'd probably like it more if you weren't disgusting and wet right now. So you pull back and head towards the boat.

It turns out that the Bandits had a solid camp set up. There's some meat already cooking over a roaring fire and they turned the ship into a rather impressive little shelter. They even have a few barrels full of clean water tucked in what used to be the hull. Apparently they were planning to be here for a while. So next on the list is not freezing to death. You peel off your armor and the clothes you had on under it, throwing them to the sandy ground with a wet flop.

John takes your currently empty pot and fills it with some of the extra water so the two of you can sort of clean yourselves up. Near the fire being naked is actually not too awful. Better than wearing wet clothes and being covered in mud, anyway. John plops down next to you and starts undoing what's left of his armor.

"Yeah, that breastplate is totally a lost cause," he says. "Why couldn't the stupid thing go for the leathery bits? Those would be so much easier to replace!"
"You think you'll be able to get a new one in town?" You ask.

"I sure hope so. Actually, I kind of hope they'll have something a little better. We might be able to afford steel at this point. I wish that spell didn't destroy that last bandit's gear." Then he reaches for his bandage.

"Wait!" You say, as he unties it. "That's supposed to sit for at least-!"

But he just keeps unwinding the linen. He should start gushing blood. The hole was deep and your craftsmanship rushed. But he doesn't. Actually, when he picks the little bits of plant matter away his skin is smooth and flawless. There's not a single mark anywhere nearby, unless you count bits of dried blood. You know you're getting better at alchemy, but you're not anywhere near that good. You have plenty of your own scars to prove it.

"What the fuck, John?" You ask as he pulls his shift the rest of the way off.

He scowls at you, blush across his cheeks. "Man, don't make this awkward now! If it bugs you so much you can look away!"

"Not that, you falmer-brained imbecile!" You cross over to him and move his hand to run your fingers down his side. "What happened to the wound?"

"Oh, that," he shrugs. "I've just always healed fast."

"Always healed fast?! John, 'always healed fast' is a broken bone that goes away in three weeks. 'Always healed fast' is a sprain that's better in a few days. 'Always healed fast' is not having what should probably be a mortal wound go away in like ten minutes!"

He rolls his eyes. "It's just restoration magic, dude. I'm a battlemage, remember?"

"But you didn't glow at all. You were practically unconscious!"

He shrugs. "You must not have been looking when I did it."

"Okay fine, but what the fuck was that blue thing back there?!"

He stiffens for a moment but then tries to play it cool. "It's just another spell. I just don't like using it too much because I never know what'll happen."

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh hey, I think that salmon's ready," he says, prodding the fish with a stick.

"You're avoiding the question," you point out.

"Not really sure I can explain it." He shrugs. "It just… it is okay? I can do it, but the effects are random, so I don't do it often. That's all there is to it."

You start to say something, because that can't be all there really is to it, but maybe… maybe this is the kind of thing you're happier not knowing in the first place. Then he thrusts a big chunk of fish in your face and, okay, that smells good. And you haven't eaten since late this morning. At least for now, you decide to let things lie.

sundas, 7th hearthfire, 4e201
it was tricky working along the coast, but thanks to shadowmere we made it all the way to winterhold. there are a stupid number of sabercats in the tundra, but at least their pelts are worth a lot. there’s also a shitton of horkers, but apparently as long as you don't mess with them you'll be fine.

so we trotted into town and gods, if i thought windhelm was depressing…

this is supposed to be the capital of the whole hold, but there's more people in and around battlehorn than here. more buildings too. like half the town's just foundations of buildings that look like they've been there for years but no one's bothered to clean it up. then again, no one's bothered to clean up the mammoth skeleton in the square either.

at least the inn is alright. they've got great food (a lot more horker, but also some pheasant and rabbit, which they mixed together in this really awesome stew) even though their mead isn’t as good as the stuff in some other places we’ve been to.

all the people here really seem to hate the college and mages and stuff. so we pretended that wasn't like 90% of the reason we were here. instead we said we’re just out looking for adventure and work and stuff, which is still technically kind of true. so we picked up a few minor quests. might take care of them if we wind up in the right spot. for now karkat just has a list going.

we’re turning in early tonight so that we have plenty of time at the college tomorrow. karkat just wants me to just see it and get out, but i’m pretty sure we’ll end up being there a little longer. that seems to be how stuff goes on this adventure. besides, the mages are staying out of the war so it’ll be nice not to get dirty looks for being an imperial.

It's a dark day when you wake up. The sky is thick with clouds the color of ash. Even though it's only Hearthfire, this far north winter already started. Or maybe it never really ended. The snow that had just been a little flurry last night just got worse and the winds picked up speed. At least back home in Windhelm the walls and buildings provided some sort of shelter, but here the air gathers speed all across the sea until it smacks you right in the face. John looks absolutely miserable the moment you step outside. Fucking southerners. You're not thrilled about this either, but at least you're not shivering and clutching a sabercat pelt like letting go of it would kill you.

An altmer waits at the base of the bridge, just standing under the stone arch wearing simple robes like the frigid winds were nothing. You figure she probably has like a resist cold amulet or some shit. Altmer aren't that tough, even if they're born and raised up here.

"Halt," she says. "The way is treacherous and the gate will not open. State your business."

"Aren't you supposed to be open for research and stuff?" John asks.

"Not with the war. It is too dangerous to allow access to random outsiders."

"We're here to see Sollux Captor?" That might work. Like, you probably will see him, and even if you'd deny it to your grave you were kind of excited at the prospect.

"He's off on college business," she crosses her arms, "He will not return for several weeks. And he's not the type to get guests out of the blue"

"Oh well, guess we'll have to go home," You say with a shrug. "Come on."

“Hang on,” John says “I've got this.”
“What are you-?”
“I’m actually here to apply for the college.”

The altmer blinks. “What?”

"Yeah, seriously, what?"

“I’m here to apply. Can I join?”

“Well, if you’re looking to become an apprentice,” she takes a step to the side and points to a rune at her feet. “Cast a fear spell on that. If it works, I’ll lead you to the college.”

“Really?” John asks, raising an eyebrow, “That’s it?”

“All we need is for you to prove your aptitude. We will provide the more formal training.”

John shrugs, “Well, alright then.”

His hand begins to glow purple and he flicks his wrist. You don't notice much of a difference, but apparently a thing happened because the altmer nods in solemn approval.

“That’ll do,” She says. “Follow me, then.”

And, oh, it looks like the way ahead is treacherous. The fucking bridge is practically falling apart, and the winds are even harsher up here over the sea. But somehow you manage not to get blown off and fall to your death. Must be a magic thing. The altmer leads you into a courtyard absolutely covered in snow and ice. Ugh, you'd think a bunch of wizards would at least keep the path clear with fireballs or something, but no.

"Someone will be free to show you around soon. In the meantime, just wait here. I must return to the base of the bridge." She leaves and the gate shuts behind her with a metallic clang.

Well… at least it's a bit warmer in here? Yeah, there's still the snow, but at least the wind's blocked by the walls.

Then one of the doors slams open and you hear a familiar voice.

“Yes, we understand your role here as Thalmor adviser to the Archmage. However, she will call on you when and if she needs your assistance.”

Wait, is that-?

"Miss Maryam, please. Just allow me a bit more access to your-"

Oh Azura, it is! How is that possible? You don't even care. You drag John around the corner so you can see and, yeah. She's changed her hair, but it's obviously her.

"Mister Scratch! If you’d please, I’ve already given you my answer. And I’ve been informed new apprentices are on their way and they will require my attention upon their arrival. Now if I am not mistaken-” her eyes widen as she sees you. "By the nine. Karkat, is that… is that you?”

You can't help but smile. “Yeah. It is.”

Kanaya takes a few steps towards you and then picks up speed. Oh shit, she's totally going to pull her war axe out and you would totally deserve whatever she did to you. But instead, her arms wrap
around you and she pulls you close.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispers in your ear.

“I missed you too.” You grab her shoulders and gently push her away. “But how? I-I saw you go down! I thought you were dead.”

Kanaya smiles. “Perhaps I was for a while. But our Archmage is quite talented in restoration. She was able to save me.”

"Are we going to meet her, then?"

"Soon I think. And when do I get to meet your… companion?” She asks, peering over your shoulder.

"Oh right. Kanaya, this is John. John, Kanaya.”

“Is she another ex?” John asks.

“Oh fuck no,” you say “She’s more like my sister than anything.”

"Right. Our parents are quite close. We've known each other all our lives."

"Nice! Hey, what was Karkat like as a kid?"

She shrugs. "Loud, aggressive, prone to tears and emotional outbursts. So basically the same, but smaller."

“Hey!”

John starts laughing. Some boyfriend he is.

“Now,” she continues, "typically we give our new apprentices a tour. But last time I checked you were never interested in the arcane arts. So perhaps we ought to head inside to talk?"

"Sure. Where?"

"The Archmage’s quarters should do nicely, I think," she says, opening a door behind her.

"Will it be alright for us to just go there?” John asks.

“It should be. I mean, I live there too.”

"You do?” You ask.

She laughs, soft and warm. "From my understanding it's perfectly normal to share quarters with one's spouse."

“Wait, you're married? And you didn’t even fucking tell me?!"

She takes a deep breath. “You disappeared. For three years. With a bounty on your head so high you would be killed on sight. What the fuck was I supposed to think?”

“You had what?!” John demands. "I mean, I knew you left, but I didn't realize- Karkat, what did you do?!”

“Maybe… maybe we should head upstairs first," you say meekly.
Kanaya nods and ushers the two of you inside and up two flights of stairs. The Archmage's quarters are too fancy for your tastes. Cases filled with soul gems and potion ingredients line the walls. In front of the fireplace there are a pair of velvet chairs and one footstool. Kanaya sits gracefully in one, John takes the other, and you grab a chair from the nearby desk.

"So," You say when you sit down. "Where do I start?"

"I don't know," John says frowning slightly. "I just… If we're gonna keep travelling together I need to know who you are."

"John! Look, I just didn't want you to get mad. It's all… really complicated."

"Perhaps you should stick to the facts for now," Kanaya says.

"Okay, fact one: it is totally not my fault."

"Alright, then why are you so worried?"

"John," Kanaya says. "Please, give him a chance to explain. He is right in that it is… complicated."

"Fine."

"Okay, so you know my dad. You know what he's like; what he's trying to do. And you know how the Nords treat us. We're all stuffed into that one cramped alleyway, and nobody really has the money or skills to get out. Eventually we ran out of space. Three years ago there were people sleeping on the floors of distant relatives' rooms when there were empty houses all over the place just outside the gray quarter. But because of Ulfric's stupid laws, none of us were allowed to go there.

"I mean, some people did because they were desperate, but the penalty for that is pretty severe. You get the same number of lashes as number of days you were supposedly on the property. So of course no one was captured right away; the guards waited for like a month and then took in around a dozen people, including young kids and one pregnant woman.

"Normally everyone likes to keep their heads down, except for my dad because he's fucking crazy, but people weren't going to stand for that. So that time basically every Dunmer and most of the Argonians showed up. We just stood between the dungeon and the whipping post, refusing to budge."

"But that can't be the only reason you're in trouble," John says. "I mean, otherwise wouldn't your dad be in more trouble?"

"Well, he has enough blackmail to keep most of the higher-ups off of him directly. Besides, his peace and forgiveness talk is the only reason the Dunmer and Argonians are getting along and the docks haven't been burnt down since '54," you say with a shrug. "But yeah, it wasn't over. With that number of non-Nords gathering, the guards got scared. I don't know if one of them panicked or if they'd planned it, but one of them fired an arrow into the crowd and everything went to shit.

"We did what we could, and some of the elders are super talented in magic, but the guards had the high ground. They'd put archers were up on the rooftops, and they threw all kinds of corrosive and frenzying potions down on us. I can't really say all of what happened."

"Well," Kanaya says. "A number of those who did not want to fight were slain as they ran. More were probably killed in the fighting. I made it up onto the roof but was run through by one of the soldiers before I could do much."
"I knew who a lot of the big players were at the time," you add. "So I went after as many of them as I could find. I got Ulfric's steward and his commander of the guard and there was, uh…"

"A good amount of property damage?" Kanaya suggests, smirking.

"Yeah, that. A bunch of us made a break towards the docks and we broke into different directions trying to escape. I managed to get back in contact with most of them, and when I wrote dad I found out that they had blamed the fighting on me. If Ati didn't want the guards to come down even harder on the people who stayed he couldn't do anything about it."

John just stares at you, mouth slightly open.

"A-Anyway, you know the rest after that. I wandered around with a few people and doing quests after that. But eventually we all broke apart. Whiterun was reasonably tolerant, so I started trying to settle down in Helgen."

"Why didn't you tell me?" John asks.

"Because I knew you wouldn't have wanted to come with me if you did. Just the look on your face when you saw people being killed by that dragon, the way that you talked about bandits…"

"You're not a bandit, though," He says. "Are you?"

"No!"

He takes a deep breath. "I mean, it was a battle. Even if you finished it, they started it."

"I don't think that matters too much, honestly," you say, looking away.

"It does! Karkat, what you did then sounds like what we're doing now. I mean, you were attacked, and they were gonna hurt innocent people. If you can fight in situations like that you're supposed to, right?"

You frown. "I'm not so sure."

"I mean, if that's not how it works, what does that make us now?"

You open your mouth to talk, but… honestly, you don't have an answer.

"Well," Kanaya says, folding her hands together. "I think that just about covers most of this. Why don't the two of you explore the college? I'm sure others will be willing to help you."

"What are you gonna do?" You ask.

"I… didn't sleep last night," she says. "Honestly, I am moments away from passing out right in this chair."

You snort. "Wouldn't want you do something as undignified as that."

"Of course not." She stands and shows you to the door. "I'm certain I will see you either this evening or tomorrow."

You start heading back downstairs and the door closes behind you with a nearly imperceptible click.
day three at the college! i spent the last two days studying. i already know much of the stuff they teach apprentices, so i started working with some of the other members of the college. i figure that if i spend a lot of time working on different kinds of magic i might get better at fighting people who use it. i’ve gotten a lot better at illusion! karkat’s spent almost all of his time in the library. i asked him about it and he started giving a blow by blow explanation of the third era version of the lusty argonian maid he’d found and how it’s different from the version we have now.

i stopped asking after that. (his rambling is why i didn’t write yesterday. i fell right asleep!)

tomorrow should be exciting, though! tolfdir, who is the wizard who does the basic training, said that there’s an excavation going on in a place near here called saarthal. and apparently karkat’s friend is in charge of the dig! we get to head out there tomorrow and karkat’s coming with us. i can’t wait to get back to dungeoneering! hopefully there are still some draugr left for us!!!

KARKAT: THAT’S INNUENDO ISN’T IT?

KARKAT: I GUESS IT IS NICE TO BE ABLE TO SIT ON MY ASS FOR A WHILE, BUT GODDAMN IT’S FRUSTRATING. THERE’S NOTHING FOR ME TO ACTUALLY DO AROUND HERE. JOHN’S ROOM DOESN’T HAVE A FUCKING DOOR SO WE CAN’T EVEN MAKE OUT.

KARKAT: AT LEAST THERE’S DECENT LITERATURE TO KEEP ME BUSY.

Saarthal really isn't anything special, to be honest. It's big, sure. But other than that it's just one more Nordic ruin. Tolfdir leads you inside. The place is a wreck, boards and platforms covering nearly every surface to keep the roof from caving in. Tolfdir is talking all about the history of the settlement, how it was destroyed, blah blah blah. John is hanging onto every word with rapt attention. You should have just stayed in the college. You could talk to Kanaya about that vampire book she lent you.

But then, “Hey losers!”

Oh, you'd know that lithp anywhere. “What’s up, asslord?” you ask without looking up.

“Wait, fuck, Karkat, is that you?” Sollux blinks his weird mismatched eyes at you.
“Is that a friend of yours?” John asks.

“Oh fuck no!”

“Like I’d ever befriend an idiot like him!” Sollux sneers.

“So I’ll take that as a yes,” John replies, grinning like the little shit he is.

“Hey Tolfdir, can I borrow these two?” Sollux asks.

“Whatsoever for?”

“I need some help finding some shit.”

“Alright,” Tolfdir says. “Just ensure they come back safely.”

“Please,” Sollux rolls his eyes. "I don’t think that the literal end of the world could kill a Vantas.”

You scoff. “Yeah, okay. Sure, what do you want us to do?”

“I’m looking for four artifacts. Each of you need to bring back two of them.”

"Seriously?" You ask. "You're sending us on a fetch quest?"

“Any sort of clues to let us know what we’re looking for?” Oh John, why are you being nice to this douche?

Sollux shrugs. “I got you out of the lame-ass tour. Dude, you looked like you were about to claw your own dick off in boredom. So you figure it out. Now fuck off.”

Actually, you may be able to use this. You grab John by the wrist and drag him away.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Not sure yet. To the off in which Sollux told us to fuck in the direction of."

"Huh? Do you have a place in mind?"

"No, I just mean… I was thinking maybe if we found some secret corner we could make out a little. Or something. I don't know.” You blush and refuse to make eye contact.

He swallows. "Yeah. That could be- Yeah."

John takes the lead then, pulling you into a little side chamber. Normally he leans down those couple inches to kiss you, but this time he just stands straight and gives you this smug-ass look.

"Hehe, you have the cutest little pout!” John says.

You give him a low growl, and stand up on your tiptoes so your lips can meet. It's only been like a week, but John's touches have already started to feel so natural. And it's been hard for you at the college. No door means you can't really get anything but chaste little kisses and you want more. If you thought for a second John would catch you, you would literally have jumped on him. You're nineteen years old and full to the brim of sexual energy. Honestly, maybe you have been reading too many of those romance novels again. It never used to be a problem, but now you can't help but imagine all the things you want to do to John, all the things you want him to do to you. And then you would fall asleep and wake up next to his big, solid body, basking in his warmth and
surrounded by his scent... And you couldn't do a damn thing about it because the lack of privacy makes you even more chicken shit than usual.

But here in this moment, he's kissing you, touching you everywhere. You tell yourself he wants this as badly as you do, that even if you know you're falling too hard and too fast you can at least hold onto these moments when you can almost believe he loves you.

Oh wow, apprentice robes are sooo much nicer than metal chest plates. You can feel every muscle and sinew as you press yourself against him. Johns hands, big and hot, slide under your shirt and he pulls you closer. You just need there to be separate top and bottom pieces for this robe so you could actually get your hands on John's pecs because goddamn.

But then that bastard pulls away with a smirk and, oh hell no, you're not playing that game today. You shove him back against the wall, making sure to keep one hand behind his head so he doesn't smash it and-

Clatter-clack.

Something small falls to the ground beside you.

Ka-shink!

Spikes rise from the floor, blocking the exit.

Well shit.

John detangles himself from you and calls out. "Hey! Is anyone out there?!

"Don't draw attention to us," you hiss, trying to smooth your hair back down closer to its normal state of disarray. "If Sollux finds out we were-"

“Oh my god, what the fuck did you do?” Sollux rounds the corner and glares at you.

“I don’t know!” John cries, “We were just looking around in here and then this happened!”

“You obviously triggered a trap, fucking morons.” Sollux says. “See if you can figure it out so we can reverse it.”

“Something fell right before the pikes came up,” you point out. “That probably did it.”

“Oh right!”

It's a little too dark to see clearly, especially with Sollux blocking your light, so the two of you crouch and feel along the floor. You don't come across anything but dust and rock, but then John remembers he can just make light. He casts the spell and a pendant glimmers in the corner. He lets out a cry of triumph and stands, necklace dangling in his grasp.

“Oh right!”

“Okay, I’ve got it! Now what did I do with it?”

“Hell if I know,” Sollux snorts. “What happens if you put it back where it came from?”

John tries it. “Nothing. Wait, what if I try...” He puts the amulet around his neck and summons a fireball. “You may want to get out of the way.”

You take a few steps back, pressing against the bars. John releases the fireball and there's a sharp crack, followed by a series of thuds and then there's a big ass hole in the wall.
John laughs. “Wow! Didn’t expect that! Come on, let’s go see what’s down there!”

He runs down the passage, dragging you with him.

“Oh man! Think of all the loot that’ll be down here!”

"Don’t steal my fucking artifacts!” Sollux yells.

"Finders keepers!” John calls back.

Well, at least this should be a lot more fun. Well, you say that, but before anything interesting can happen you hit a dead end. The tunnel has widened into a round chamber that just seems to have sealed coffins inside.

“Ugh, dammit!” you roar, kicking a small stone, “We’re still fucking trapped!”

“Well it could be worse. I mean, we can just go back to what we were doing befo-“ His eyes go wide, his skin goes pale (well, relatively), and he just stares into empty space.

“John? Are you okay?”

"That... That wasn't a normal vision."

"Huh?” you ask. "You get visions?"

“Did… did you see that guy?” he asks, instead of answering your question.

Okay, fine. You'll play along for now since he's obviously freaked out. “What guy?”

“A monk-mage guy. Everything went all white and blurry and-“

“John, there was no guy. Is this more dragonborn shit?”

“Maybe? I don’t know. He said, like, there was stuff in motion now. Things that couldn’t be stopped. And that depending on what I do I’d be judged by these guys called the sy-chick order?”

“Not sy-chick, asshole. Psijic.”

“Sollux? How the fuck did you get down here?” You demand.

“Thijic?” John asks.

“No! Psijic! Like in Psiioniic!”

“That’s what I said! Thijic!”

“Okay,” You say. “Are we just going to debate over Sollux’s lisp instead of talking about how the fuck he got in here?”

“Yes,” They both say.

You groan, “How the fuck am I the most mature one here? Sollux, what in the name of Meridia’s unfairly revealing tunic is the Psijic Order?”

“They’re an ancient order of mages, Altmer for the most part.”

“Of fucking course.”
“But they disappeared over a hundred years ago. There’s gotta be some serious shit going on if they’re talking to you. They only contact people they decide are ‘worthy.’ Like a bunch of total dicks.”

“You wanted to join, didn’t you?” You ask smugly.

“None of your beeswax, asshat.”

“Anyway,” John says, giving you a look to keep you from harassing Sollux further. “What kind of ‘shit’ has to be going down?”

“How the fuck should I know? It’s not like they talked to me.”

Then the draugr decide to attack.

There’s only like three of them, and they go down fast. Thankfully, the bursting out of their coffins thing opened up a new path.

"Alright," Sollux says, "Let's go."

"Let's?" you repeat. "You're coming with us?"

"Hey, this is my dig. And this part of it is a lot more interesting than going back to counting pottery shards."

"Fine," you huff, "But you'd better not slow us down."

He smirks. "Oh trust me, I won't."

You have to admit, Sollux's combat skills have improved a lot since you saw him last. He’s gotten a lot better at conventional magic in addition to his sparky whatthefuckery. With his help it's one of the easier dungeons you've cleared in a while. The only real challenge is putting up with his bullshit. Or that's what you'll say if he asks, keeping up the belligerent angle. But fuck, you've missed this douche. You've missed picking at him and having him bite right back. Yeah, your friendship is weird and probably not healthy, but he's so damn emotionally constipated it's the only way he knows how to show he cares.

Then you finally reach the end of the dungeon. When Sollux steps in he goes completely still and silent. He just stares open-mouthed out ahead of him. What the hell? Usually he always has something to say.

"Uh? Karkat?" John says.

"What?"

He points ahead, presumably at what Sollux was staring at in the first place.

"Oh," You say with your normal grace and eloquence.

Out past Sollux there's a giant sphere, at least eight feet in diameter and covered in bright green ancient writing. Sollux takes another step forward and a loud, unearthly wail fills the cavern.

“Shit.” Sollux says

A large draugr claws its way out of the ground, wielding a massive staff in one hand and a sword in the other. The horns of its headdress crackle with magic. Well, that's gotta go down.
John summons a flame atronach and you charge forward, sickles drawn. You leap at the monster but phase right through. Unfortunately, it doesn't work the other way around. The draugr hits you with his sword and *fuck* that hurts. Good thing it's blunt after centuries of being buried.

"Karkat!" To his surprise it isn't John calling you, but Sollux. With your full name, nonetheless. "Fuck, you keep him busy!" He tells John.

The draugr swings again, but at least this time you can dodge. Then there’s a harsh crackling noise and the greenish glow of the cavern is overpowered by red and blue. John’s atronach takes aim, and this time it seems to hit. You get in a few good slices before John smashes its head in.

Sollux lowers his arms and the green glow reasserts itself.

"What is that thing?" John asks.

Instead of answering, he just says, “Go back to the college.”

"What?!" You demand. "You can't expect us to just-

"Go back to the college," Sollux repeats. “Go there and tell RL what we found here.”

"What about you?"

"Someone has to watch this thing. Like I said, this is my dig. That makes this thing my responsibility."

You want to argue, but then he gives you a look that makes a shudder run down your spine. This is not the time to argue or fuck around. John, however, can't tell that this is Sollux's serious face and tries to object. You grab him and pull him out of the cavern.

You've got a message to deliver.

Ugh, if only you hadn't left the horse! It's nearly five miles back to the college, and with the blizzard it takes you just over two hours. It's long after sunset when you finally get back. Kanaya is standing in the courtyard, carefully trimming the snowberry plants.

"Kanaya!" You call out

"Karkat? What are you doing back? I thought you were to spend two nights at Saarthal."

"If Sollux says 'RL' does he mean the archmage?"

"I suppose he would. Why?"

"Sollux says we need to talk to her."

"Well, she tends to be a bit… irritable this time of night, but if Sollux has sent you back this early it must be urgent. Follow me." She leads you through the same door as the first night and then back up the stairs. She gives a brief knock at the upper door before announcing, "Rose, darling, two… erm the apprentices are here to see you."

She steps inside and you follow. A young woman sits in one of the comfortable chairs near the fire. She has a silver goblet in one hand and a letter in the other. Her black dress is simple but elegant, a black velvet sheath with no adornments, but which hugs her body perfectly. You can't tell if she's a Nord or a Breton or even just a really pale Imperial, but between her ivory skin and hair about six shades to light to be golden, if it weren't for her dark makeup and outfit she'd vanish in the storm.
"Ugh, has another apprentice been incinerated?" She asks without looking up. "As though I didn't have enough trouble."

"Are you the archmage?" John asks.

Honestly, you're not surprised he feels like he has to check. Between her age and her attire, she doesn't seem very... archmage-ly? But she gives him an annoyed look. Okay, you take back everything you thought. She looks tired and vaguely annoyed, but behind that expression you can feel the power and arcane knowledge in her violet eyes.

"Why else would I be here?" She asks, voice cool but unyielding.

"Rose, my light," Kanaya says, the implicit threat of lecture in her voice.

The archmage takes another drink from the goblet. "Right. What is it you need?"

"Right! When we were in Saarthal, we came across this big glowey... ball... thing. Sollux says you should see it!" Wow, good job John.

She raises an eyebrow. "'Big glowey ball?' I presume Sollux will be more specific once I arrive." She downs the rest of her drink and rises. "I suppose I'll be off, then."

"In the middle of the night?" You ask incredulously.

"It's the beginning of the night," she corrects. "And anyway, do not worry about me. I have battled far fiercer storms. I shall be fine."

"Um," John says, "What should we do in the meantime?"

"Whatever you'd like. Perhaps if you'd like to continue aiding in the excavation you should head to the library. Perhaps you'll be able to discover more about this artifact." With that, she strides past you.

"The library, huh?" John asks, staring pointedly at you.

"What?" You ask.

---

flame-draws asked you:

Now, I'm curious because through my eyes your relationship went quite fast. Are you sure it's not a 'friend's with benefit' type thing? Because I somewhat know how Karkat gained his feelings for John, but what the latter?

KARKAT: ARE YOU KIDDING ME? PEOPLE GET MARRIED AFTER TWO DAYS AROUND HERE. WE'RE TAKING IT RELATIVELY SLOW. I MEAN, IT'S REALLY MORE OF A HANDFASTING THING AND YOU HAVE A YEAR TO BAIL, BUT STILL.
john: i do care about him! he’s really brave and strong and he’s secretly a total sweetheart.

KARKAT: AM NOT!

john: i’m trying to complement your dumb face.

KARKAT: -GRUMBLE GRUMBLE-

john: -squeezes his hand- you can call us whatever you want, but i really like all the stuff we do together.

KARKAT: YOU SAP.

john: yeah, but i’m your sap. hehe :B

john: *sigh* i’ve tried. it’s just these damn nords are so anti-magic it’s awful. karkat’s not openly resentful to me using it, but he’s not willing to touch the stuff himself.

john: for the most part i’ve been enchanting his clothing when he’s not playing attention. i mean, i have to do something to keep him safe.

john: oh man, i wish! i’m still not good enough to use that spell yet. it would be so much easier if we didn’t keep getting lost in mountains and forests.

KARKAT: IT’S NOT MY FAULT YOU COULDN’T NAVIGATE YOUR WAY OUT OF YOUR OWN ARMOR WITHOUT MY HELP.

john: come on, that was one time and it was bent up.

KARKAT: SURE. HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO FIND YOUR WAY OUT OF WHITERUN AGAIN?

john: a-anyway, you’re probably right about the couriers.
John: Actually, I haven’t activated any traps since I got here! I mean, they always have big obvious buttons.

Karkat: They are not obvious!

John: Dude, even if you don’t look at the floor you can always see the big spikey gate, or the hole where the things shoot out, or the log suspended from the ceiling or-

Karkat: Shut up! Didn’t you say you got stuck in a cage in an Ayleid ruin for like a whole day?

John: Dude, I was like ten. Besides, Jake tricked me into doing it because I said dungeon-diving wasn’t real adventuring and then he was grounded for like a month.
Chapter 5

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

MIDDAS, 10TH HEARTHFIRe 4E201

THis MORNING WE STARTED LOOKING FOR INFORMATION ON THE WHATEVER-IT-IS WE FOUND IN SAARTHAL. WHEN WE FINALLY TALKED TO THE LIBRARIAN HE TOLD US THAT HE USED TO HAVE A BOOK THAT COULD HELP US, BUT SOME FUCKNUGGET NAMED ORTHON TOOK IT WITH HIM WHEN HE LEFT THE COLLEGE. APPARENTLY HE RAN OFF WITH SOME OTHER APPRENTICES TO FELLGLOW KEEP SO THEY COULD DO SOME UNETHICAL CONJURATION SHIT.

JOHN WANTS TO GO THERE RIGHT AWAY. HE’S INTERESTED IN LEARNING THEIR SPELLS, I KNOW IT. SO BASICALLY NEED TO TRY TO KEEP HIM AWAY FROM THERE FOR AS LONG AS I CAN AND HOPE HE'LL FORGET. THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT IT’S FAIRLY FAR SOUTH, AND I CONVINCED HIM THIS COULD WAIT UNTIL WE WORKED OUR WAY BACK AROUND TO WHITERUN.

I HOPE THAT WORKS.

THAT SCRATCH GUY STOPPED US ON OUR WAY BACK DOWNSTAIRS, SAID HE KNEW WE FOUND SOMETHING UNDER SAARTHAL AND EXPECTED A FULL REPORT. I TOLD HIM TO FUCK OFF, BUT HE JUST SMILED AND SAID IT WAS SIMPLY HIS BUSINESS TO KNOW EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS AROUND HERE.

I’VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS MAGIC SHIT. TOMORROW WE’RE HEADING TOWARDS DAWNSTAR. MAYBE HANGING OUT WITH A BUNCH OF MURDERERS WILL REMIND JOHN THAT HE’S SUPPOSED TO BE A GOOD GUY.

turdas, 11th hearthfire 4e201

so we tried to leave winterhold today. tried, being the key word.

so it started because karkat wanted to check out the shrine of azura. we figured it wouldn't be a big deal, but the snow was absolutely insane! back home this time of year we can't even wear cloaks. but we got lost for like five hours around the foot of the mountain before we finally found the way up! the good news is that we killed a lot of ice wraiths on the way, so we should be able to sell their essence when we get into town.

the shrine itself is actually pretty cool! there aren’t, like, big jewels and the altar is just a table but the statue is so huge! i have no idea how they kept it in such good shape on top of such a windy mountain.

there’s only one person keeping the shrine, a dark elf named aranea. oh boy, did she like to talk. a lot of it was about the history of the shrine, azura’s guidance, aranea’s meditations and visions and how everyone eventually left except for her.

but the more important part is that she said she’d seen visions of us coming up the mountain. she said she knew azura’s champion will arrive and seek “an elven mage who can turn the brightest start black as night.” whatever that means.
so i asked her where i start seeking this mage, and she just gave me this look. apparently i’m not the champion, karkat is! oh, you should have seen his face when he found out! it was half shock, half elation and all adorable.

after he stopped staring slack jawed at the priestess, he tried to drag me back up the road to winterhold! but by then the sun had set and the storm was getting worse, so we’re spending the night up here instead.

karkat’s going to wake me up at the break of dawn, i just know it. but you know what? i’m happy for him.

FREDAS, 12TH HEARTHFIRE 4E201

WE SPENT ALL FUCKING DAY WANDERING AROUND WINTERHOLD. THERE ARE TOO MANY ELVEN MAGES IN THIS TOWN AND ALMOST ALL OF THEM ARE INTERESTED IN ASTRONOMY. THEN IT TURNS OUT THE MAGE WE’RE LOOKING FOR ISN’T EVEN *IN* THE COLLEGE! IT’S THAT NELACAR BASTARD WHO HANGS OUT IN THE INN ALL THE TIME! WHY ARANEA DIDN’T BOTHER TO MENTION THAT IS FUCKING BEYOND ME.

BUT AT LEAST IT SEEMS LIKE THIS QUEST WILL TOTALLY BE WORTH OUR WHILE. NELACAR SAID THAT THIS WAS ACTUALLY ABOUT AZURA’S STAR AND MAYBE IF I’M ABLE TO GET MY HANDS ON THAT IT’LL BE ABLE TO SEND A MESSAGE. EVEN IF I NEVER ACTUALLY USE THE STAR, JUST HAVING IT… IT’D BE SOMETHING.

APPARENTLY WE NEED TO LOOK FOR SOME GUY NAMED MALYN. HE WAS DYING, AND WANTED TO F**K WITH THE STAR SO IT WOULD HOLD HIS SOUL OR SOME SHIT, LIKE HE COULD REALLY CHANGE SOMETHING SO DEEPLY TIED TO A GOD. AZURA DROVE HIM INSANE BECAUSE HE WAS MESSING WITH HER SHIT. IT SEEMS OBVIOUS ENOUGH TO ME, BUT NELACAR WAS REALLY PISSED ABOUT IT. HE SAID THAT WE’RE NOTHING BUT PAWNS TO THE DAEDRA. NOT SURE WHY HE BOTHERED. THAT’S A GOOD WAY TO GET STRUCK BY LIGHTNING IF NOTHING ELSE.

BUT THE PLACE MALYN IS SUPPOSEDLY HOLED UP IS DOWN BY WHITERUN, AND IF WE DECIDED JOHN CAN’T HEAD OVER THAT WAY, I GUESS I CAN’T EITHER. WHICH IS BULLSHIT, BUT WHATEVER.

SO WE’RE SPENDING ANOTHER NIGHT AT THE COLLEGE. WE JUST SOLD THE SHIT WE PICKED UP ON THE MOUNTAIN AND THEN HEADED TO OUR ROOM. EVEN IF WE CAN’T DO MUCH, AT LEAST WHEN IT’S DARK WE CAN KISS AND PRESS UP AGAINST EACH OTHER UNDER THE BLANKETS.

I’M JUST SO FUCKING SICK OF THIS PLACE. IT FEELS LIKE WE’VE BEEN HERE FOR MONTHS.

loredas, 13th hearthfire, 4e201

we finally left winterhold for real today! it’s nice to get a change of pace. i’ve honestly kind of missed being out in the middle of nowhere. karkat and i spent a lot of time wandering around and found a shrine to talos along with another one of those big waystones.
but because we spent that much time we didn't make it to dawnstar before sundown. we ended up in a place called hob's fall cave according to the map. it was full of necromancers, but it wasn't that big of a deal. it was really hard to get them with magic, so i brought my warhammer back out. i've missed that thing a lot. wish I had some proper armor, though. stupid winterhold doesn't even have a smith.

i really wish i still had the colonel's gear though. i'm still so mad i lost it! and dad’s gonna kill me, which is never a good thing.

anyway, they had a pretty nice setup in the middle of the cave. plenty of beds and food. for now we’ve pushed two of the beds together and are sitting around and counting our loot. it’s not half bad.

karkat found this white ball with a lot of little indents on it. when he picked it out of the chest he got this really far-away kind of look on his face. i wonder if it’s a nostalgia thing. i haven’t asked him about it. all he did was pull out the map and stare at it for a while. he finally put a marker on a mountain way in the west.

i hope we talk about it soon. But I guess I’ve been asking a lot of him lately. It’s not fair to him, but i’m just not sure i want to tell him about me yet.

Aw man, and you thought the weather in Eastmarch was bad. The morning after you cleared out the cave you woke up to find half a foot of snow and the blizzard still raging outside. And while it was nice having Karkat all to yourself for a while, after three days you're starting to get a bit stir crazy. After all, there's only so long you can keep sparring and having sloppy makeouts (usually in that order. Somehow you always wind up wrestling, and that inevitably gets a little more friendly until it’s too much and one of you has to pull away).

But, still, it's so nice to wake up with Karkat's face looking adorable a few inches from yours. He's so cute when he’s asleep, relaxed and carefree in a way he never is when he’s awake. His breaths are soft and even, and the most troubled he gets is letting out an occasional murmur. In the middle of the mental struggle between whether to risk waking him to fulfill your need to kiss his adorable nose, you realize it's quiet. The wind outside has stopped howling. You leap out of bed and bolt to the cave entrance, just to check. Up above the sun is shining and the air is crisp and clear. And cold, shit, you probably should have put pants on first.

For now, you run back inside to wake Karkat. Right next to the sea there's no telling how long the good weather will last, and you wanna get a move on already! If you have to spend one more night in this cave you're going to scream. And then because you woke him up, Karkat is slower than a goblin learning philosophy, but finally he manages to get dressed, get his armor on, and eat something.

In spite of the cold in the air, it's nice to have the sun on your face again. Maybe you're just not cut out for life this far north. You're keeping your adventure to Whiterun and the Rift from now on!

As you predicted, the nice weather doesn't last that long. You make it maybe a mile before the sky turns black again, the wind begins to almost bowl the both of you over, and the snow falls so thickly you can barely see a hundred feet in front of you. Luckily there’s a lighthouse nearby. The fire’s lit, and that beacon is just about the only thing you can see. Hopefully whoever owns it will let you stay for a while. You knock, but no one answers. So you try opening the door and-

Oh.
A Redguard woman lies atop a broken table, a rough axe embedded in her abdomen. Blood is splattered all around the room. And it happened recently. The remnants of a fire still crackle in the hearth and the blood hasn't even fully coagulated.

“Oh Akatosh… What happened?” You ask Karkat. “It can’t be a robbery. They left everything here.”

“You’re right, it wasn’t” He kneels beside her and pulls the crude axe out of the body in order to inspect it. “We should get the fuck out of here.”

“And where, back into that storm? We’ll freeze to death!”

“We may not have much of a choice.” He takes a deep breath. “Do you have Falmer in Cyrodiil?”

“Do we have what?”

“Didn’t think so.” Karkat sets the axe back down. “People say they used to be elves, but they’ve gotten seriously fucked up over the centuries. You can’t reason with them, can’t talk to them. They’re more animal than person at this point, except for animals don’t usually attack people for no reason. Not sure why they’re here. Normally they stick to Dwemer ruins, but if they think this lighthouse is theirs it’s a lost cause.”

“But why would they kill her?”

“That’s what they do. No one really knows why, but the second they see a person they attack. So let's not let them find us. Come on.”

“No! Someone else is gonna have to come back to man this lighthouse,” you say, crossing your arms. “We can’t let them get killed the same way.”

Karkat gives you an unimpressed look, “You’re going to take on a whole fucking tribe of Falmer because they killed some woman you never met.”

“Yes. And because I trust my hammer more than the weather.”

“John, you are the stupidest human I have ever met, which is saying a whole fucking lot, but…”

"But?” You ask smiling.

“I guess Tamriel’s fucked with a dead dragonborn. At least this way when you get way over your head I can bail you out.”

You laugh. “Sure, sure. I think if we follow the trail of blood we should find what we’re looking for. Come on!”

He rolls his eyes but follows you. The trail, it looks like, leads to the basement but the door is locked. Karkat finds the key in an urn on the mantle and the two of you descend together.

There’s a chittering noise that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand on end. You get out your hammer, feeling a little more confident with it in your hands.

That doesn’t stop you from letting out a shout of surprise when you see it, though. The “it” in question is an armored insect, five feet long with pitch black hide. It rears its head, begins to click angrily, and then you see thick, black liquid shooting towards you.

“Fucking move!” Karkat tugs you out of the way.
The liquid makes a hissing sound as it hits the stone behind you. Karkat leaps onto the monster and buries his sickles deep in its neck. It staggers around for a bit before collapsing.

“What the hell was that?!” you demand.

“Chaurus,” He says. “I’m guessing you don’t have those either.”

“Um, no.”

“The Falmer use them like cattle. Giant, violent, carnivorous people-eating cattle.” He grunts as he pulls his sickles free. “Next time don’t fucking scream, and they probably won’t attack us.”

“They won’t?”

“I said probably. But yeah, even if they’re hungry you just need to make Falmer noises and they’ll leave you alone.”

“What kind of noises?”

Karkat makes a low, growly sound that reminds you of a starved dog. You try to copy it and he just laughs in your face.

“Oh Daedra, that was beautiful. Now, if you told that to a Falmer or a chaurus they’d probably try to kill you faster. So don’t do it until we’re out of here.” He takes a piece of cloth from the shelf and wipes off his sickles before putting them back in his belt. “Now come on, you’re the one who wanted to do this. Unless you’re ready to back out.”

“Hell no! Come on! We’ve got a Redguard to avenge!”

He shakes his head and climbs through the hole in the wall.

You don’t know if you’ve ever felt as painfully useless in your life as you do when Karkat’s leading you through the tunnels. It’s absolutely ridiculous. The place is swarming with chaurus that should be a massive challenge, but Karkat just turns them back with a growl. The only times you even have to fight are when you’re up against actual Falmer, and they’re almost pathetically easy to kill. In fact, it’s only when you get stuck fighting their chaurus (which refuse to listen to Karkat) that you end up getting hurt. But even that’s nothing that a quick bit of magic can’t fix.

Well, that’s how it goes until you get to the end. It’s another wet, chaurus-filled chamber. Assuming it's no big deal, you jump right down over the ledge. Karkat follows and then his face goes completely white. You turn to see what he’s looking at.

“O-oh man, think about how big of a boot you’d need to squish that,” You whisper.

“Sure, that’s exactly what we need to be considering while we’re trapped with a twenty-five foot venomous earwig and all of its little wigglets.”

“So, uh, wanna start talking?”

He looks towards you and his eyes go even wider. “Oh fuck.”

“What?”

“So that’s probably the queen, the thing that’s supposed to protect the whole group.”

“Yeah?”
“And we just jumped onto one of its egg sacks.

You look down and see bright blue splattered on your boots. “Shit.” However, you’ve forgotten to keep your voice low so it turns and sees you. You suddenly can’t breathe at all. Goddammit, why are you always so useless around fucking monsters?!

The chaurus queen lets out an enraged roar and starts racing towards you.

“Sorry,” Karkat says. He’s running his fingers over that necklace he always wears with the sideways sixty-nine on it.

“It’s not your fault.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

You’re about to ask him what he means when the ground begins to shake. Then, holy fuck, there’s two of the damn things. And the new one’s even bigger. As if you weren’t already dead…

Wait a second, is that other one eating all the smaller chaurus?

“Don’t just fucking stand there!” Karkat says, drawing his blades. “Help him!”

You have no fucking idea what he’s talking about, but you start shooting fireballs at the first giant chaurus until the second bites its head off. And then it turns towards you.

It rushes at you, head low, but Karkat sheathes his weapons.

The chaurus stops a few inches in front of his outstretched hand. Karkat reaches over its massive jaws and scratches the thing between its eyes.

“Good boy,” He says.

You just blink at your boyfriend and the monster and wonder how this is your life. "You can control chaurus." You say flatly.

"Well, I wouldn't say I can control them, I just- Hey!" He turns angrily to face his pet monster. "That is not for eating! Drop it!"

The creature opens its mandibles a treasure chest clatters to the ground. It chitters sadly and it’s almost… cute?

"Oh shoosh." He pets the creature and gives it a piece of meat. "There's a good boy."

It chitters happily.

"Seriously, Karkat, what in Oblivion?! I can't- how do-"

"Okay, buddy, that's all I need. You can go whenever you want."

The Chaurus nips him affectionately, screeches, and dives back into the earth.

"Oh, right, you okay, John?"

"How?!" You demand, stomping up to him.

"How what?"
"How what, he says," you mock. "How did you do that?"

"….Right," He pulls his necklace out from beneath his shirt. "It’s ‘cause I have this. It lets me summon that particular chaurus."

"But why didn't you do that earlier?"

He rolls his eyes, like you've asked a stupid question as opposed to a completely fucking reasonable one. "Sure, let’s annoy the thirty-foot, armored, venomous creature on a regular basis. I don't like to call on him unless I really need to because there tends to be a lot of damage when he shows up. Like, remember when I told you about the riot?"

You nod.

"Well, the reason it was so bad was because I used him. He got pissed off and killed about twenty guards, destroyed several buildings, and some other related shit. And he'll overheat if I call him up during the day."

"Oh. What about the other Chaurus? Does having the necklace have anything to do with that?"

"I donno." He shrugs. "They just always seemed to kind of like me. I'm not sure if it's the amulet or just genetic. Because you have to be part of my mom's bloodline for this piece of shit to actually work."

"Wait, that’s a blood-keyed item?!" you demand. "Those things are super rare! How did she get one?"

"If she knew, she never told Dad." He tucks his amulet back under his shirt. "Apparently it's been passed down for longer than anyone can remember. Usually it's mother to daughter, but apparently gender's not that important. But there's probably a decent number of cousins scattered around Eastmarch who would kill me if they knew I had it."

"That's awful!"

"That's life."

"It doesn't have to be."

"It does if you're me," he replies flippantly, like there's no way you could understand. "But come on, let's get out of here. There'll be more falmer and chaurus and I don't want to be here when they realize how much damage we did."

MIDDAS 17TH HEARTHFIRE, 4E201

JOHN KNOWS ABOUT THE CHAURUS NOW. HE KNOWS WHAT I AND THE AMULET CAN DO. AND HE SEEMS WEIRDLY OKAY WITH IT. I GUESS I'M LUCKIER THAN I THOUGHT.

WE RAIDED A FALMER SETTLEMENT TODAY AND THE CHAURUS STUFF JUST SORT OF ENDED UP COMING OUT. IT WAS MESSY AND I'M EXHAUSTED. WE KNEW IT WOULD BE DANGEROUS TO STAY THERE, THOUGH, SO WE CONTINUED HEADING WEST. THANKFULLY, THE SNOW LIGHTENED UP A BIT.

WE FOUND AN IMPERIAL CAMP, AND EVEN THOUGH I HATE BEING AROUND THESE
ASSHOLES AT LEAST THEY’RE LETTING US REST HERE FOR THE NIGHT FOR FREE. AND WE GOT TO SELL SOME SHIT TO THE QUARTERMASTER, SO THAT’S GOOD.

WE’RE HEADING OUT AT DAWN. HOPEFULLY TOMORROW WE CAN MAKE IT TO DAWNSTAR. FUNNY THAT I’LL FEEL BETTER SURROUNDED BY A BUNCH OF MURDERERS THAN THESE SOLDIERS. THAT’S LIFE, THOUGH, I GUESS.

JOHN KISSED ME IN FRONT OF EVERYONE AFTER DINNER. IT WAS JUST A QUICK LITTLE PECK BEFORE HE WENT WITH SOME OF THE SOLDIERS TO GET WATER, BUT IT WAS IN PUBLIC. WE’RE SHARING A BEDROLL TONIGHT (I’M PRETTY SURE THE IMPERIALS THINK WE’RE MARRIED. WHATEVER), SO EVEN IF WE CAN’T DO MUCH I CAN HOLD HIM CLOSE. HE SEEMS PRETTY SHAKEN UP ABOUT THE CHAURUSES. POOR BASTARD’S PROBABLY GOING TO HAVE NIGHTMARES FOR A WHILE.

Your heart pounds in your ears faster than your feet pound the ground. The smell of blood is so thick in the air you can scarcely breathe. But you have to keep breathing, have to keep running. There’s chittering and scampering coming from everywhere. You can’t hope to pinpoint the sound, so you can’t know which way to run. There’s dripping too. The cave is damp. Liquid runs down the icicles. You always hope it’s water, but as soon as you get close you realize it’s blood.

The chittering’s getting louder. The dripping’s getting louder.

But then that’s not all you hear. There’s a resonant sound, soft and low. You can’t identify it, but it calms you. Unlike the other sounds, you know exactly where this is coming from. You stop running and take a few steps towards it. The other noises grow softer, and you feel a fresh, cool breeze on your face, gently caressing your scalp as it runs through your hair.

Your body is heavy. Perhaps the running is catching up to you. The cave slowly fades away into darkness.

For just a moment you regain something like lucidity. You’re not quite awake and your eyes never open, but you recognize the smell of horse, of forge, of men, of fresh air. You identify the noise as Karkat’s voice. He’s singing something, low and soft and slow, alien but comforting. He lies half next to you, half under you. You feel his strong, compact body against your own and suddenly feel completely safe in this strange land.

You fall back asleep before he finishes the song. When you awake you don’t remember dreaming, but you imagine that if you did it was of the elf curled up beside you.

morndas 18th hearthfire, 4e201

as luck would have it, we made it to dawnstar just in time for a dragon attack. I feel like they’re getting easy to kill, but I think it probably helped that everyone in town was there to back us up.

it was going really great until a guard ran right in front of one of my fireballs and they stopped everything to make me pay 40 gold. like, really? there’s a dragon attacking. shit happens.

but other than that dawnstar’s not that bad. it’s kinda small, but bigger than winterhold. They have a smith too! Tomorrow we’re going to go in and see if they can make me a new set of armor. apparently they’re having some trouble with dreams or some shit, though. no one’s sure why, but we’re gonna do some investigating around town tomorrow. sounds like it'll be fun!
You awake to the feeling of someone shaking you rapidly.

“Karkat! Karkat, wake up!”

“John?” You ask, opening your eyes. “What’s going on?”

“We’re not at the inn anymore.”

You rub the sleep from your eyes and sit up. Well, he’s right. The room is about twice the size, and there are potions, food, and a few strange metal implements lining shelves that the inn didn’t have. Also, this bed feels a lot better. The sheets are softer and smoother than you’ve ever felt, and the mattress is too soft to be straw.

But in spite of the finery there’s something very odd about this place. It has a strange smell you can’t quite place, salty and metallic, very unlike the scent of fresh bread and alcohol that filled the inn. The air is cool and damp, and above all else it’s far too quiet.

Then you turn around and see the banner hanging above the headboard with a big black handprint on it.

“Well fuck,” You say.

“I know,” John hisses, “I'm not sure why we're still alive, but we have to get out of here.”

“Actually, we’re probably relatively safe. I just hope you’ve got a strong stomach for psychopaths this morning.”

“What?”

“Remember Gamzee?”

“Oh.”

You stand and go to the chest at the foot of the bed. At least someone was nice enough to leave you some clothes “Why would they bring us here, though? Why wouldn’t he have just shown up again?”

"Hell if I know,” you reply, pulling a pair of pants on. Huh, this actually fits pretty well. You might just keep it. Always nice to have a spare. “Nobody really understands clowns. He probably wants us to meet the rest of the family.”

“Wouldn’t you know his family?”

“Well, I know Kurloz since they’re actually brothers and he was in Windhelm before he went to train with the greybeards. But, I mean, they’re the Dark Brotherhood, so they tend to glob together in an incestuous pile of deathfuckery.”

“Right.” John summons his glasses and places them on his nose. “So, should we go then?”

“Might as well,” you say with a shrug.

You throw open your door and step out into the sanctuary proper. “GAMZEE MAKARA, GET YOUR FUCKING ASS OUT HERE!”
You jump. You’ve heard Karkat yell before, sure, but it’s never been at quite that volume. You’re fairly certain the ceiling just shook. A man in black and red armor draws a sword.

“You dare speak of the Listener in such a manner?”

“I’ll speak of the stoner clown however I fucking want. Now where is he?”

The man seems startled. He stands head and shoulders above Karkat, is about twice as broad, wears full armor, and carries enough weapons to open a blacksmith shop. Still, he meekly sheathes his blade and says. “He’s in his chambers.”

"Yeah, okay, but where is that?" The guard points. "Let’s go."

Karkat stomps off towards one of the adjacent hallways and you follow behind him like a puppy. This place gives you the fucking creeps. You hear screams of agony and harsh laughter from somewhere not too far off. A little girl with bright red eyes walks by. She smiles at you, showing off her pointed fangs.

You stick a little closer to your boyfriend.

Eventually you reach a large, thick door marked with the hand insignia. A tall, slender dark elf exits the room. His hair is big and wild and his face painted white, except for the black stitches holding his mouth shut. He bears a striking resemblance to Gamzee, so you're guessing this is probably the brother Karkat mentioned.

“He in there?” Karkat asks.

The elf nods and smiles. He makes a few quick motions with his hands. You have no idea what the gestures mean, but Karkat apparently does. He groans and rolls his eyes.

“Ugh, of course. Thanks.”

The elf notices you then. He points to you and makes a few more gestures.

“Hmm? That’s John. He’s my companion for the moment. Don’t worry about him, he’s kind of an idiot.”

“Hey!”

“Anyway, John, this is Kurloz. He’s Gamzee’s older brother and the current Speaker in charge of this sanctuary. Which is ironic as fuck since he’s mute. But apparently he’s really good at book keeping and shit.”

Kurloz doesn’t seem to be listening to Karkat. He keeps his eyes on you. You feel a sharp chill and the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end. For a moment you swear you feel fingers around your throat but you shake it off.

Then he smiles and holds out a long, bony hand to shake. You oblige him and he smiles at you before heading on his way.

“So anyway…” Karkat says. He throws the door open and it bangs against the wall.

The room inside is markedly different from the rest of the sanctuary. It’s almost blazing hot, and the walls are brightly splattered with all colors of paint. The most prominent hue is a deep rusty crimson, and you hope to Namira that it’s not blood. It smells strongly of skooma and alcohol.
Several empty bottles lay upon the floor. The bed is unmade and covered in more bottles. Gamzee is still half in it. Curiously, it’s his bottom half. His head is on the floor, resting next to what appears to be a very creepy looking ancient doll. He’s snoring up a storm, a puddle of drool in his hair.

All he has on is a far-too-loose pair of purple shorts. At this point you’re just thankful he’s not naked.

Karkat then proceeds to kick him in the face.

“Get up, shit stain.”

He opens one eye. It’s even redder than normal, completely bloodshot.

“Mmm… hey Brother. Wha ‘cha doin here?”

“Why the ever-loving *fuck* are you asking me that? You dragged us here!”

“Did I? Ah, well a motherfucker does shit when he’s gettin’ his skooma on, you know? That energy bit before everything gets all mellow is motherfuckin crazy with that new triple-distilled shit.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Nah. I ain’t fuckin nobody right now. Thanks for askin’.”

Karkat groans. “Gamzee, you are a mess.”

“Yes.” He twists his body and his legs fall onto the floor.

“Ugh, come on, John, let’s go.”

“Hey, don’t motherfucking up an abandon me again, brother!”

Karkat looks down. “Look, I’ve told you before. I’m fucking done cleaning up your messes.”

“Wait, uh, hang on a sec. I think there was a reason I brought you here. Gimmie a minute.”

“This ploy is absolutely ridiculous. I thought this would be beneath you, but apparently you’re still willing to sink far enough as to-“

“Oh shit! I motherfucking got it!”

“Lovely.” Karkat sneers.

“Somebody’s up and ordered a hit on you.”

“What?”

You feel your stomach drop. How many assassins are in this sanctuary? Even if there’s only five you’re never going to be able to escape. All of your weapons are in another room and you’ve seen how fast Gamzee can move. This is so-

“Eh, don’t worry about it,” Gamzee says. “I mean, Cal would never accept a deal to kill a brother’s brother.” He gestures to the puppet he’d been using as a pillow. “Just wanted to say somebody ain’t too happy about what’s going on.”
“Gamzee, who was it?”

He shrugs. “I don’t remember. Think there was something about a motherfucker with a crazy octopus mask or some shit? If I remember anything else I’ll send you a letter. Just wanted you to know to watch your back. Hey, you steal from anyone lately?”

“No. Thanks for the warning, but we’re out of here.”

“Mmm… okay, stop by any motherfuckin time you want. We’ll be here.”

“Sure. Whatever. Come on, John.”

You nod and follow him back out. The sooner you get out into fresh air the better.

The moment you’re out of the sanctuary Karkat leans on the wall and buries his head in his hands.

“What’s wrong?” You ask.

“We’re getting out of here.”

“What?”

“I am in no mood to be anywhere near those assholes. If we stay Gamzee will probably just forget about this and take us back tonight. Let’s keep moving.”

“You sure?”

“We sold all our shit yesterday and there’s not much else to do here. Come on.”

“But what about the dream stuff? And my armor?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. It’s just… I don’t wanna be here.”

“Okay,” you say softly. “Let’s go.”

He starts walking away. You hang back for a moment and wonder what the hell happened today. Bugs and assassins and Karkat can just deal with it all like it’s nothing. Maybe… Maybe it’s time you told him the truth after all.

---

**Anonymous asked you:**

*either of ya ever thought of joining the dark brotherhood?*

**john:** what? no! of course not!

**KARKAT:** THOUGHT ABOUT IT, DECIDED AGAINST IT.

**john:** karkat!
Karkat: It was when I was still dating Gamzee, okay? And you know how it is when you’re a kid. You think everything’s gonna work out perfectly and that the first person you’re with is your fated partner or something.

Karkat: Then your boyfriend starts getting super religious and turns into a murderous psychopath and it's kind of a relief when he dumps you to be closer to Sithis.

John: I see...

Anonymous asked you:

Karkat, you wanna help John get the caedra items, right? That means y'all are gonna have to join the Thieves guild, since Nocturnal is patron to thieves (( also DAT ARMOR ))

John: Oh yeah, aren’t we in the thieves guild?

Karkat: Oh yeah. We’re supposed to be burning down a manor or something?

John: I’ll put it on the to-do list!

To-Do-List: follow Erandur to Nightcaller temple, bring Merida’s beacon to Mt. Killkreath, bring the unusual gem to Vriska, find Azura’s star, find books in Fellglow Keep, find Shalindor’s writings, clear Goldenglow estate, retrieve the white phial, speak with the leader of the Dawnguard, retrieve horn of Jurgen Windcaller, retrieve Nettlebane, find the redguard woman in Whiterun, find red eagle’s sword (ctd on back side.)

John: Eh... we’ll get to it.

Loquaciousky asked you:

Wait, so Restoration isn't okay, but summoning giant creepy bugs is? Jeez, Karkat...

Karkat: Look, I don’t summon the *finger quotes* “giant creepy bug.” The amulet does. Enchanted objects are different from using the magic yourself.

Karkat: Everyone knows that.
Chapter 6

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

Chapter Notes

So I took a week off for christmas, but also to do a full read-through because the final rough draft is finished!
And the final piece of it is posted back on tumblr, if anyone's interested.

Also, this chapter is a tad longer, because I figured I could do that or two shorter ones. And I kind of want to get this all up soon for the two of you that read this.

fredas, 19th hearthfire, 4e201

we made it to those dwemer ruins karkat kept going on and on about today. i’ve never really been into one before, and let me tell you they’re really creepy! there’s steam and metal machines everywhere and everything has this creepy green or yellow glow. and some of the machines decided to attack us! the way they move is just so weird, all jerky and stuff, and the things were all shaped not quite like real things and it was just so creepy!

note to self: figure out some way to include actual monsters in future battlemage training. freezing up like that is kind of a big problem.

karkat was really the only reason i kept going. the further we got and the more shit we saw the more and more excited he got. he was practically vibrating when we got to the last chamber, and i just barely kept myself from saying anything. if i pointed out how unbelievably adorable he was i figured he’d probably get all huffy. but it didn't make much of a difference because when we got to the last room it kind of fell apart. there was this glowing pedestal on the left. he ran right up to it and his face dropped. he started saying no over and over and scrounging around on the ground nearby.

after a couple of minutes he fell back on his ass, stared at the contraption in disbelief, and started to cry. i tried to get close to him but he just pushed me away.

the most i could do was rig up a camp site. i made a fire, got out our bed rolls, and started cooking some fresh venison. eventually he kind of scuttled over and sat down, draping a blanket across his shoulders.

he’s passed out right now. the poor guy must be exhausted. i just wish i knew what was going on in his head…

FREDAS 19TH HEARTHFIRE, 4E201

IT ISN’T HERE.

THAT FUCKING LYING BITCH

IT ISN’T HERE.
Karkat seemed a little bit more like himself this morning. We camped out in the ruins and then started heading west again. We managed to get to a town called Morthal, which is kind of like a smaller colder Riften.

They barely have anything there. Not even a smith (not that we made it in time to buy things anyway, but I really hope I can get some real armor soon!). But apparently there's a lot of weird stuff going on. Their jarl and her family all get visions too, but everyone is convinced that they're important visions of the future. I wanted to tell them they're just sick but there are ways to deal with it and that's okay, but when I mentioned that to one of the villagers they got really angry at me, saying there's enough going wrong already. And, well, they're not wrong. There's a house that just burned down killing a woman and little girl, and everyone's afraid of this wizard who just moved in. The good news is that means Karkat and I might be able to get some work that doesn't involve endless dungeon crawling, hordes of undead, and/or giant creepy bugs.

Hopefully.

At least their inn is warm and pretty clean. They have good pheasant roast too. I think that's it for now. We're going to investigate that house tomorrow and see what happens.

You and John head off to the burnt husk of the house in the morning. The air isn't too cold, but you're not about to go tromping through the water, which means you have to take the long winding bridges that connect the town. But eventually you manage to wind up on the right island. When you step across what was once the threshold you hear a child giggle.

"Hello?" John calls. He looks around, checking behind poles and what's left of the walls.

The laughter continues, but there's something creepy about it.

"Come out already!" You demand.

The child gasps and goes silent. Shit.

"It's okay," John says softly. "We're not gonna hurt you."

"Are you sure? Mr. Elf is mad, and whenever daddy got mad..." the voice is coming from behind you. You turn, but see nothing.

"You didn't deserve that," you admit. "I thought you were teasing us."

"Don't worry. We only beat up bad guys."

"Okay." The word is barely more than a whisper, but then there's a chill in the air.

You've never actually seen a ghost before, but you're pretty sure this is what they'd look like: translucent and just a little bit blue. The little girl wrings her hands nervously as she looks up at the two of you. Your breath sticks in the back of your throat. This poor little thing...

John takes a knee, so he's a little closer to her height. "Is this your house?" He asks.

She nods. "Yep! Me and mommy and daddy live here!"
You copy John’s posture, trying to appear as unthreatening as possible. Maybe you shouldn’t have come fully armed. “Can you tell us what happened?”

“Um, it was way past bedtime. I remember me and mommy were snuggled up together in bed, I don’t know where daddy was. But there was a lot of smoke. Way more than the fire normally makes. I tried to wake mommy up, but she wouldn’t move. I was scared, so I hid in the wardrobe. Then when I woke up I was… like this.” She frowns. “I’m dead, aren’t I?”

“Yeah,” you say, trying to sound soft and gentle.

John shoots you a dirty look, like there was a way to sugar coat that kind of thing. “You’re gonna be okay. We just have to figure out why you’re still here. We’ll fix what’s wrong and then you can move on.”

“Oh! I know that! I’m here to play hide and seek!”

“Hide and seek?” You repeat.

“Yeah! I have to keep playing hide and seek until someone finds me!”

“We’ll find you,” John says softly. “But this town’s kind of big. Can you give us a little hint?”

“Um… I’m not really sure where I am. But maybe if you find the other woman she’ll be able to help! She comes around a lot, and she wants to play hide and seek too. But be careful! She’s mean and doesn’t want people to find me.”

So someone's hidden her body somewhere and is guarding it. Great.

“Okay, what’s she like?” John asks.

“She’s cold and has red eyes!”

“Sounds like a vampire to me,” a man behind you says.

The girl gasps and vanishes. You turn to see a tall Redguard dressed in dark robes.

“Who are you?” You ask.


“Karkat. So do you like hunt them down?” You ask, shaking his hand.

“I prefer to help them when I can. Most vampires are turned against their will and just want to go back to being human. Here in Morthal we can give them that chance.”

“Huh,” John says. “I guess that’s kind of cool! I’m John, by the way.”

He chuckles. “Pleased to meet you. You’re one of the first who’s thought of it that way. Most of the town… well, you’ve heard how they talk, I’m certain.”

“Can you tell us anything else about what we’re up against?” John asks.

“I had my suspicions, but this is my first bit of confirmation there was a coven nearby. But come back to my house, and we’ll talk.”

You follow him, and he gives you a bit of information on the town, its magical properties, and the
weird ceremony he does in the swamp to cure vampirism. You hang out at his house until sunset and then you head out.

It’s cold and overcast now, but at least it’s not snowing. You have no idea where to find the little girl. The area around the marsh all looks the same to you. That’s probably what happens when you grow up in a high-walled city where the only plants grew from cracks in the road.

John seems to know what he’s doing. Of course he does. As much as he freaks out about totally normal, natural monsters, he somehow seems to know everything about ghosts and other dumb magic shit. Sometimes you still wonder why he even brings you along. Falion told you to search for a graveyard and so you do.

Do they even have one of those here? There’s no hall of the dead or temple. Where the fuck do these people bury their dead? Or do they just scatter ashes like in some of the colder areas where they can’t break the ground?

You wish it wasn’t so dark. You can’t see a damn thing outside the pathetic ring of light your torch makes, but no, you had to go after dark to find the vampire. It’s hard to say how long it takes. To you it feels like hours.

Then John lets out a surprised cry. “Karkat, look at that!”

You lift your head and see a small coffin surrounded by upturned dirt. “That looks like it,” you say. “Now all we need to do is find-”

There’s a loud hiss, a glow of red, and you feel yourself growing weaker. You sink to your knees but turn to see a Breton woman dressed in black. Her skin is pale and her eyes are as red as yours.

That has to be her, the vampire. She keeps her arm up, and it looks like the red glow is orbs of light she pulls out of you. The world is spinning. There’s a loud crack and a scream.

John’s at your side then. He’s saying something, but you can’t understand. He sounds scared… You don’t want him to be scared. You lift your hand and place it on his cheek to try to comfort him. He feels so warm.

There’s another voice then, a man’s. He and John talk for a while, and then you’re being carried. If John’s got you, it’ll be alright to sleep for a while. Right?

You sit behind the single bed in Thonnir’s house. He was kind enough to offer it to Karkat for the night after you bumped into him at the graveyard. You just wish you could help your partner more. He looks so miserable, pale and shivering. When you stroke his forehead his skin is ice cold.

Thonnir hands you a bowl of soup and a mug of ale.

“I’m afraid there’s not much we can do for him ‘til morning,” He says. “At eight we can head over to the Thaumaturgist’s Hut. Lami usually keeps a few potions of cure disease and there’s a shrine of Kynareth to the southwest. You could try either or both after sunrise. No reason for you to get hit by a vamp too.”

You sigh. “I guess not. But I really hope this works. If I lose him…” You drift off, not wanting to think about that.

“You two married?”
“No. We’re together, but…”

“Ah, not wanting to take the trip to Riften? I understand.”

“Nah. I’ve only known him a little over a month.”

“And? Oh marriage is a bigger thing down in Cyrodiil, ain’t it? Don’t you guys have handfasting first?”

“Yeah.”

“See, it’s the other way ‘round up here. Give you a year to walk before anything’s permanent. Generally works pretty well. I got married to this girl who had always acted so sweet, but it turns out-“

You drink your soup without saying anything, just letting your host ramble on. You try to focus on the crackling of the fire and not Karkat’s labored breathing.

You can’t. He keeps drawing your attention, and the more you see him in pain the more you want to get out there and fight. You know killing vampires isn’t going to help him, but it’ll keep them from hurting anyone else. Besides, it’ll keep you busy, and now you know just where to start.

Thonnir told you Lalette, the vampire you killed, was supposed to meet with a woman named Alva. Apparently word is that Alva was having an affair with the dead girl’s father, who was conveniently absent when his house burned down. It’s not really definite proof, but you don’t really care. It’s more than enough to warrant an investigation.

“I’m going out,” You say.

“Alright,” Thonnir replies. “The night air might help clear your head, but be careful.”

With an affirmative grunt you leave the house, taking your warhammer with you.

It’s nearly dawn, so you should be safe. You manage to find Alva’s house with only a little bit of asking around, but the door’s locked. Of course it is. If she really is a vampire, she’ll already be asleep.

Your hands are shaking as you try to pick the lock and you snap like ten lock picks before you get it open. The moment you get inside, a nord man attacks you. He’s not really much of a challenge. Most people aren’t, and he seems kind of dazed and confused. There’s something not quite right.

Instead of killing him you knock him unconscious and place him on the bed. Then you begin your search. There’s not anything of interest throughout most of the house. More alchemy ingredients than you’d expect, but that’s not proof of vampirism. The odds are decent you have almost that many in your backpack.

Then you find the cellar. The coffin with the diary explicitly talking about raising people as vampires and a master vampire wanting to turn the town into a blood farm is kind of a dead giveaway.

You’re tempted to just run off to find the lair on your own, but you have no fucking idea where it is. Besides, trying to take on a whole coven of vampires by yourself strikes you as really, really stupid. When you leave the house it looks like the town is starting to wake up. Now that it’s morning you might be able to do something for Karkat!
After stopping to get medicine, you sprint back to Thonnir’s and find Karkat sitting up in bed, sipping broth and nibbling on a loaf of bread. Relief floods through your body and you can’t help but smile.

“Where the fuck did you wander off to?” Karkat asks. He’s trying to play it cool, but his voice is rough and scratchy. “Get your ass over here!”

You do and he wraps his arms around you. His grip is weak, and it makes him feel smaller somehow. But he’s awake, he’s alive, and you think he might be a little bit warmer too.

“We both had a bit of a fright when he woke up,” Thonnir says. “He tried to attack me with a spoon.”

“I think I did pretty well!”

Thonnir laughs. “After I mentioned you he calmed down, though.”

You laugh and sit on the edge of the bed. “You feeling any better, Karkat?”

“A little. What happened?”

“First, drink.” You hold out the small bottle you got from the town alchemist and he takes it.

As he starts to sip you tell him your story, filling him in on killing the vampires, running into Thonnir, what had just happened in Alva’s house.

“So what’s the plan now?” he asks.

“We need you to get better.”

“I don’t think we have time for that. I had a potion, so I’ll be fine. Let’s go!”

"Karkat…"

“The longer we wait, the more people will get hurt.” He gets out of bed and reaches for his armor. “If you’re worried about it we can find that shrine, but I don’t want to wait another night. You’re thicker than you look if you think the vampires will sit around twiddling their thumbs while you pick them off one at a time.”

He wobbles slightly where he stands. He’s still so weak… it’s a good thing you have a horse, you guess. You have him climb on and the two of you head down to the shrine. With every step you take more of Karkat’s strength and color comes back. Maybe this is a little bit of overkill, but you don’t want to risk it. Once he gets the blessing from the shrine he looks perfectly normal, but you still don’t trust it quite yet.

“How are you feeling?” You ask, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear.

He smiles cheerfully at you. “Good. Now, let’s go back to town. We need to find out where we’re going.”

"We?"

His face falls. “What, you don’t think I’m gonna let you go in alone, do you?”

“Karkat, you’re sick!”
"What the fuck did we go through all of this shit for? I’m fine! And if you’re worried about me getting sick again, the vampire just took me by surprise yesterday. It won’t happen again."

"I won’t lose you!"

He just looks at you for a moment. Oh Kynereth, that was too much, wasn’t it? You bite your lower lip but stand firm. Karkat takes a deep breath and presses his mouth into a flat line.

"You’re right. You won’t.” He climbs onto Shadowmere and offers you a hand. “Because we’re gonna kill the fuck out of those vampires as soon as we find out where they are.”

You take his hand. “Well, either way we have to get you back to town.”

With a grunt he helps you up and you slide on behind him. You wrap your arms around him and just enjoy the fact that his skin is warm again.

You’re not sure what John is or was so worried about. It’s just another dungeon. Sure, you’re up against vampires instead of draugr but that’s really just a different type of undead. Besides, Thonnir came with you (everyone else said they would but then they just bailed. Typical humans.) so you have more backup than usual.

There’s a standard vampire up ahead. You draw your sickles and start to sneak forward, but John leaps right in front of you.

"Watch out!” He says, which only manages to get the vampire's attention.

It hisses and starts throwing ice spikes at you.

"Dammit, John!"

He throws up a ward and then charges the monster, bashing its head in with his hammer. But while he’s distracted another one comes up behind him. You manage to get behind it and cut its throat, but John is wholly oblivious.

"Are you okay?” He asks. "Oh my gods, what happened to your hand?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake. It's not my blood!” You point down at the collapsed body at your feet, blood still seeping out from the wound.

"Oh. Well, glad you're okay!” He smiles and then keeps moving forward.

"Thank you for saving my life, Karkat,” you grumble. "I should get my head out of my ass and start-"

John summons a flame atronach and sends it to fight with the next vampire. "You say something?"

"Focus," Thonnir says. "This is no time for quarreling." He runs his sword through a thrall and then turns back to you. "The cave is not that much bigger. The master must be ahead. Prepare yourself."

"Got it," John replies with a nod. "Hey, Karkat? There's no shame in-"

You shove him to the side and march forward. The tunnel lets out just in front of an altar littered with bones. A pale figure stands behind it, murmuring to itself. One thrall stands on either side of it, waiting at the ready. This is your chance. You tip an arrow in poison, ready the shot and-
The arrow embeds itself in the altar. The vampire waves its hand and the thralls charge forward.

Oops. You turn and run back, trying to lure one or two of them away. John summons another atronach and then swaps out for his hammer. Standing next to the atronach makes you sweat a little bit, but you're not going to keep shooting from behind people you don't want to hit.

You aim for the thrall's chest and as soon as you let go you realize the shot was too high. But, luckily, that means it hits him in the throat so you'll take it. The thrall collapses and John's atronach takes down the one behind it before fading away.

John pulls you back behind him. "Are you okay?" He asks again.

The thrall you shot is back, glowing with purple energy. It readies its axe. You yank John forward and out of the way of the blow so Thonnir can stab it. This time the thrall falls apart into a pile of dust.

The master vampire comes down the hall, raising its remaining thrall.

"You should not have come here, humans," it growls. "Now I have to kill you and I doubt I'll be able to drink all of your blood before it goes off."

John resummons his atronach, this time placing it behind the vampire. It throws a fireball, making the vampire turn around to deal with it. John leaps forward to fight the thrall, and you find yourself racing Thonnir to get the last hit on the vampire. You get there first, running one blade across its throat and sinking the other into its chest, and Thonnir runs it through just for good measure.

The vampire lets out a horrible gurgling sound and you pull away, letting it fall to the ground.

"You think that was all of them?" John asks, dismissing his atronach.

"Probably," you reply, "or at least that was definitely the master."

He lets out a sigh of relief and puts his arms around you. Yeah, okay this part isn't that bad. John's big, and his muscles go all soft when he's relaxed so he totally gives the best hugs.

"Yeah, well, looks like we did it," you say, letting him go and stepping back.

"I'm glad that trick with the atronach worked out at the end. I was kind of afraid it would miss and take your head off."

You roll your eyes. "Come on, I'm a Dunmer. We're pretty fire resistant."

He laughs. "Okay, okay. Let's see if he had any good stuff on him."

John kneels down and starts going through the vampire's robes. You should probably talk to him, make sure he knows you mean it that you can take care of yourself. But the way his face lights up when he pulls out a gold and diamond pendant makes your heart flutter and your brain go soft. You guess… you guess you can worry about that later.

fredas 26th hearthfire, 4e201

i’m sorry it’s been so long since i’ve written. morthal's at least over its vampire problem now. we got plenty of loot from the vampires and everyone's okay. hroggar, the dead girl's father, is acting like a normal person again.
i suppose i could blame the long days of riding and dungeon crawling for not keeping this up to
day, but it's really mostly because i’ve been watching karkat. he must have been cured, because he
didn’t turn into a vampire this morning. i almost didn’t sleep last night, i was so scared.

i wanted to spend some extra time in morthal just so that if something happened the wizard could
cure him, but karkat wouldn’t hear anything about it. he just insisted we kept moving. and then we
hopped right into another dungeon. i thought everything was going fine, but he kept yelling at me
for stealing all the kills and trying to keep him out of danger. i guess i might be doing something
subconsciously, but can you really blame me? i came so close to losing him already. i know i came
to skyrim for adventuring, but i don’t know what i’d do if i lost karkat. he’s so much more
important to me than any of that now. because if he dies i know i’ll never see him again and that
just

maybe he's crabby because the last few dungeons have kind of sucked. we searched for the horn of
jurgen windcaller but someone got there first and left us a note telling us to come to riverwood.
then we stumbled upon a place called high gate and had to fight a lich to get a scroll for a nord
woman named anska. there wasn't much in there, but he dropped a pretty cool mask, so that’s
something. i wonder how much we'll be able to get for it.

we’re about half a day’s walk southeast of solitude. we’ll probably make it there tomorrow, and
then we can sell some of this loot and sleep in a real bed! maybe if i'm lucky i'll be able to get
some of the colonel's old gear back. if i can't we'll just have to buy some. either way, i’m not
leaving the city without armor. hopefully there’ll be enough other stuff to do there to keep karkat
happy for a while.

FREDAS 26TH HEARTHFIRE, 4E201

JOHN IS DRIVING ME UP THE FUCKING WALL. HE TREATED ME LIKE I WAS MADE
OF SPUN GLASS BEFORE, BUT AFTER THE VAMPIRE SHIT IT’S JUST BEEN GETTING
WORSE AND WORSE. I LIKE HIM AND SHIT BUT HE NEEDS TO STOP FUCKING
BABYING ME.

I KEEP GETTING PISSED OFF, AND THEN I DON’T FIGHT AS WELL AND THEN HE
CODDLES ME MORE. AND I LOVE THAT HE MAKES ME FEEL SAFE BUT WE'RE
SUPPOSED TO BE FUCKING EQUALS BUT HE’S MAKING ME FEEL LIKE A TAG-
ALONG KID. AND I'M ABOUT TO FUCKING EXPLODE, DIVINES MAKE IT STOP

WE SHOULD BE GETTING TO SOLITUDE TOMORROW. MAYBE I CAN TAKE SOME
SOLO MISSIONS THERE, PROVE THAT I CAN HANDLE MYSELF. I SURVIVED JUST
FINE BEFORE HE STUMBLED ASS OVER TITS INTO MY LIFE.

I JUST WISH I KNEW HOW TO GET HIM TO UNDERSTAND THAT. I MEAN, I REALLY
DO LIKE HIM SO I DON’T WANT TO LEAVE HIM, BUT HE CAN’T KEEP TREATING ME
LIKE THIS.

Solitude is beautiful, massive and sprawling. It’s built up against a large hill, so as you approach
you just see it going up and up and up. It's a proper city, huge and bustling. It looks a lot more like
the cities back home too. The buildings up near the top of the hill shimmer in the light with their
marble facades. Even outside the walls, you're seeing a lot fewer exposed wooden beams and clay
and a lot more stone. The walls have a lot more detail than really necessary too, effigies and heroes
carved into the battlements.
Also, if rumors are to be believed, this might be the only town in Skyrim with an actual functioning bathhouse. After you get settled in you are going to sit and soak for like five hours. Hopefully Karkat will come with you. Maybe a nice warm bath will help get some of the tension out of him. He's been so wound up lately!

It probably doesn't help his nerves that there's an execution going on right when you walk in. Your chest clenches and you have to look away. Ever since Helgen they've kind of set you on edge. How many of these people are like you were, just at the wrong place at the wrong time? How many people does the local magistrate just push through without a trial? It's not something you really want to think about. Especially since you have no influence up here. If it were Cyrodiil maybe you could get Dad to write a letter, but…

There's an inn, the Winking Skeever, just on the edge of town. You rent a room, head upstairs, and start organizing your shit. Usually you do this together. You put on normal clothes, dump your bags, clear the obvious camping gear and separate the loot from the supplies. Then the two of you argue because you're well aware that stuff he just wants to get rid of could be totally useful in the right situation and he's being shortsighted. But this time after he plops his pack onto the bed he pauses. He straightens up, still dressed in his full armor, and takes a deep breath.

"You okay?" You ask.

Instead of answering, he just says “You’ve been treating me differently since Morthal.”

“What do you mean?” You ask, blinking.

“You’ve been acting like-“ He takes a deep breath, “I feel like you’ve been coddling me.”

“What? No way.”

“You don't see it?” He asks flatly. "You seriously haven't noticed how differently you're acting? Don't try to tell me you're not."

You look away. “Okay, fine, maybe I'm being a little more defensive, but it's just… seeing you sick made me realize I could actually lose you.”

“Well if that’s your goal you’re doing pretty fucking well!” You flinch. Karkat talks loud, sure. He huffs and he growls and he puts on a big angry show. But this isn't long rambling anger or expletives or obtuse metaphors. This is sharp and precise and when he speaks again his voice is harsh and cold. “Look, if you really think I’m so incompetent that you need to get between me and any sort of adventure I don’t think this is going to work.”

“I don’t think that,” you say.

“Then why are you acting like it?”

“I’m not trying to! You’re just something worth protecting! And it’s not like there aren’t times you haven’t been in serious danger.”

Karkat growls, “Yeah, sure, but I’ve saved you as many times as you’ve saved me and I don’t fucking want to lose you either, but you’re not seeing me trying to stop you from doing what you love!”

“You never said you loved to adventure. You wanted to get a house!”

“But then I met you!”
You open your mouth to say something but nothing comes out. Below your feet the bard plays a jaunty tune and the bustle of the tavern continues. Outside merchants hawk their goods and children play. It’s so quiet in your room you can even almost hear some of the conversations of passersby.

“I'm not a fucking child, John.” he says, opening the door. “You're not allowed to treat me like one. If you need me, I’ll be at the Bard’s College. I’m going to see a friend.”

He closes the door behind him in a way that's far too soft and gentle, leaving you alone to try to figure out what the hell you can do to fix this.

But maybe… maybe you don't have to do this completely alone. You sit cross-legged on the floor, take a deep breath, and close your eyes.

“-And then he has the fucking nerve to tell me it’s ‘cause he thinks I’m worth protecting or some shit! I jus’ don’t know what to do.” You slam your mug down.

“Uhh… maybe not get so drunk?”

You roll your eyes at Tavros.

“I mean it’s not like it, um, really helps anything.”

“It doesn’t hurt anything either.”

“Sure, you say that now, but you know, I, uh, don’t think you’ll feel the same tomorrow at this rate.”

"You're such a shit drinking buddy, Tav. You're lucky I don't know anyone else in this city." You groan and lean back in your chair. “Seriously, though, the fuck do I do?”

“It might be a good start to cool down a bit. Maybe everything will just work out,” He gives you a reassuring smile and tries to pat you on the back, but you just push his hand away.

“You said that about you and Gamzee. And then about me and Gamzee. And then about you and Vriska.”

“Well yeah, but it seems like this John guy isn’t a bloodthirsty psychopath. And in this situation it’s actually requited.”

“Just because it’s requi- requi- req- just because we feel the same way about each other doesn’t mean it’s going to work.”

“True. But you know what will work? Sleep. Drink some water first and then maybe we can get you into a bed.”

"M not going to the inn," you say firmly. To be fair, you probably couldn't make it in the first place, but more importantly you don't want to. Not when it would mean talking to John when you're all worked up and could ruin everything in a second.

"Oh, uh, I guess you don't have to?” Tavros asks more than says. "Maybe you can stay here for the night. I don't bring guests over too often, but there are a few spare beds in the basement."

You consider the proposition for a moment. You don't have to go very far, don't have to spend time with John, and still get a nice warm bed. “Okay, fine. As long as I don’t have to speak to him.”
“I promise.”
“Thanks Tav, you’re a real friend.”
“Well you’d do the same for me, right? Now come on. Let’s get you tucked in.”

sundas, 28th hearthfire 4e201 – mid-morning.
karkat was supposed to be back by now. he went to the bard’s college to catch up with a friend of his. i figured it would be late and i should give him some space, and i was super tired so i just went to sleep and hoped he’d be here when i woke up.

he wasn’t. it's way later than we usually get up and he still isn't here.
i fucked up. i really fucked up. i thought he’d just wanted some space. i thought maybe that would help. we’ve been together almost every second of every day for a month and a half, so i can respect him wanting to go off for a while and after yesterday he probably needed to blow off some steam. but he hasn’t come back yet, and i’m not entirely sure he will. what if he got so distracted he got completely lost and had to sleep on the cold ground outside? what if he decided he's actually done with me and bought some new supplies and just left town? what if he got mugged? what if he didn't have enough money for the mugger and they hurt him? what if he

i think i’m ending this entry here. i thought maybe writing was going to help me stop crying, but if anything it’s made it worse.
i just hope he comes back soon.

You spend the next few hours sitting in your bedroom and waiting. You try those meditative techniques your dad taught you, tried praying, tried just pacing back and forth, and eventually you try writing everything down in your journal. Honestly, you should probably get out of the inn. Walking around usually helps you more than anything, but what if Karkat comes back while you're gone?

Then someone knocks. You rush over and open it, hoping Karkat's finally come back. It is a dark elf, but not the right one. He's a good couple inches taller than you and also significantly broader. And yet he seems nervous, wringing his hands and shifting his weight uneasily from foot to foot.

“Uh, hi,” He says.

“Hi?” you reply.

"Are you John?"

"Yeah?"

"Oh good, I was afraid I had the wrong place. I’m Tavros, and Karkat, uh, sent me over."

"Karkat?!" You immediately perk up before realizing he’s got to be pissed if he’s not coming to meet you himself. You look away. “What is it he wants?”

“So he came over and got really drunk last night, and now he’s kind of incredibly hungover. He wants to talk to you. And, um, the higher-ups at the college aren’t too happy about having a stranger throwing up in the dorm, so if you could get him back here that would be pretty good
too.”

“Oh. Give me a minute.”

You frantically gather up your things. Maybe it's pathetic to be in this much of a hurry. Maybe it's proving his point. But you need to talk to him; you need to try to fix this.

Tavros doesn't say a word the entire walk to the Bard's college. He moves kind of slowly through the crowd and everyone keeps shoulder-checking him like they don't even notice he's there. But you get there eventually, and somehow you keep your composure as you go into the college and down the stairs.

You find Karkat in one of the little cornered off bunks. It smells like he's been sick and he has dark bags under his eyes. He groans and rolls over, covering his face.

This is all your fault, the voice in the back of your head says. Absolutely, unquestionably your fault.

But you shake it off. Physical problems, at least, you can handle. You sit down beside him and place your hands on his chest. The moment the light of the healing spell fades he sits up. He looks at you, blinks, and then looks away.

"I'll, uh, give you a minute." Tavros says, stepping out of the room.

“Karkat?”

He turns back.

“I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, I bet you are,” but his tone holds none of the vitriol from last night. He pulls his knees up to his chest.

"I mean it," you lift your hand to touch him, but decide against it and set it back down on the bed. "Can you hear me out for a second?"

He huffs. "Sure."

"So when I was a kid – and I'm not trying to make an excuse, I get why you're upset just give me a minute – but when I was a kid my dad always put a huge emphasis on trying to help and protect people. He told me that's how we got our title in the first place, because when the castle was about to fall The Colonel came in and protected the people and because he did that and promised to keep doing that, they put him in charge. And that promise keeps getting passed down generation to generation, so the people nearby give us food and money and we keep them safe. He always says that's the way the system is supposed to work everywhere, and it's just that after a few hundred years some people forget that they made that kind of promise and start thinking that's the way things are because of fate or the gods or something. But that last bit isn't really important right now. What's important is I shouldn't have thought of you like a…” You pause as you struggle to find the right word.

"What? Like a commoner? Like a peasant? If so, I know dad's new house is pretty fucking spiffy, but I have some news for you."

You wince. "That's not what I meant. I meant that you're not someone who wants to just live peacefully." He furrows his brow, trying to figure out where you're going with this. "You're
someone who can and totally will take matters into his own hands. You're the kind of person who wants to do the protecting, not one who wants to be protected and even if you could get by in a town doing a normal trade or something you'd rather be the one making sure everyone else was safe. Or at least that's what it seems like to me."

"I mean, I haven't really thought of it like that, but I guess…"

"Yeah?"

He looks back up at you, his expression hard to read. "I guess you kinda do get it."

"Heh, if I wasn't an idiot I would have gotten it a lot sooner. I mean, I can't believe how long it took for me to realize you're like me, you know?" This time you do actually touch him, brushing a stray lock of hair back from his forehead. "So what do you say? Wanna keep doing this hero thing?"

He smiles and throws his arms around your middle. You hug him back and tuck his head under your chin. You think you'll take that as a yes.

You let John drag you to the bathhouse (and yeah, it was nice for a while, especially since you were kind of gross from the adventuring and then being sick, but you don't get why John is so fucking obsessed with it) and then finally get around to selling your loot. There are plenty of shops in Solitude and you come out with your bags lighter and your purses heavier. Then you went and put in a deposit on new steel armor for John, and there went a good chunk of your profits but that's okay. You need to get back to the inn so you can figure out how much you actually have, what supplies you need, and how much shit costs around here.

There's a beggar on the far side of the street, an old man with messy grey hair and a tangled beard. You don't like the way he's looking at you. It's like you're being stalked, even though there are a dozen easier marks on this same street. You take John by the wrist and start hurrying back towards the inn.

"Huh? Karkat, is something wrong?"

"Don't worry," you grunt, keeping your eyes forward. "I'll tell you later."

You turn the corner, getting back to the street the Winking Skeever is on but then there he is, standing right beside the door. Shit. You place your hand protectively over your purse.

"Please," he says, "I don't need your money, but you're the only ones who can help me." He has an accent you can't place, heavily rhotic and he's doing something really weird to his o's.

Well that's a new one. "Sorry," you say, "we're kind of busy right now."

"I think we could at least hear the guy out," John says, shrugging. "What have we got to lose?"

"Almost 2000 gold," you think but don't say.

"I've been separated from my master," he says. "Been gone for the better part of a year, he has"

John makes an interested sound, but when you look at him his expression is unreadable. There's the happy excitable front, but it's subtly different, just enough to make it seem fake. "Can you tell me more about this master?"

"Oh, I think you know as much about him as I do, maybe more." He shoves a cloth bundle into
John's arms. "Go to the blue palace and look in the Palagius wing." The man turns and runs off into the crowd.

John opens the bundle. It's an old cracked hipbone, so dust-covered it's turned almost black. He tosses the cloth away, but turns the bone over in his hands.

"We're not keeping that," you say.

"Nah, I think I am. And I think we should head up to the palace after dinner!"

"Are you fucking insane?"

John just laughs and shakes his head. "Seems like there's something weird and cool happening! It's probably worth checking out."

You roll your eyes. Well, if it's the palace, it shouldn't be too dangerous. Or, at least, you're less likely to get jumped. "Fine. But we're also getting food and then doing math."

"Aw, but that's so boring!"

"You wanna get half way to Morthal and realize we're out of food?"

"No…"

"Well then come on," you open the door to the inn and he follows you inside.

John’s more excited over dinner than he has been in a long time. He’s practically vibrating in his seat. You have no fucking idea what’s got him so worked up, but the mood is infectious, and you find yourself smiling too. But it's also distracting, so you eventually give up on trying to get the books balanced and let him have his way.

It takes the better part of an hour to walk to the Blue Palace. It's a gorgeous building with big spiraling turrets, the walls festooned with brightly colored flags. There are a few guards in the courtyard, but they just nod in acknowledgement as you pass. John smiles at the two beside the door as he opens it.

Apparently you can… just go in? That's weird, but you follow him.

An elderly maid sweeps the entrance hall, and John approaches her. "Hi!" He says, "Can you tell us where the Pelagius wing is?"

She looks at you suspiciously. "Why would you want to go in there?"

"There's something we're supposed to check out."

"Son, the Pelagius wing has been closed off for decades. There's nothing anyone would want you to 'check out' in there. Nothing worth stealing, neither. If I were you, I'd try Vittoria Vici's house. Gods knows she's got more money than Lady Elisif and less than half the morals."

"Look," you say, "Lady Elisif's been trying to keep this quiet, but you've got a… um, let's just say a little skeeever problem."

John looks confused for a moment, but then he gets where you're going with this and nods.

"Oh? If you're exterminators, where're your traps?" She smirks, expecting to have caught you. And honestly, you don't have an answer to that. Luckily, John does.
"We can't bring the right equipment if we don't know what we're dealing with," he says "Policy's to do a primary investigation first. Then we have to fill out an acquisition form, and it's a huge pain."

"Uh-huh, and the weapons?"

"Have you ever met a mother skeever?" You ask, "Those things are vicious."

She ponders it for a moment and then scowls. "Okay, fine. You're lucky I'm the most senior maid here today." She strides over to the right side of the entrance hall and opens a door. "Here. My shift ends at ten-thirty. If you ain't out by then, I'm locking you back in."

"No problem, thanks ma'am!" John says cheerily.

Holy shit, you can't believe that worked.

You open the door and... oh wow. Honestly, you're not quite sure what you were expecting. You've seen plenty of abandoned cottages and shacks, but those always get torn apart by nature. And, of course, you've been in plenty of old tombs, but those usually turn back into caves. This place is completely different from both, still clinging to the idea that it's meant to be man-made. The air is so thick with dust you could nearly choke on it and cobwebs hang from every available surface. What were once probably vibrant frescoes have been so darkened with filth you can't even tell what they were meant to be. John comes in behind you and closes the door.

“What the fuck are we even doing here?” You ask, covering your mouth and nose with a handkerchief to filter out the dust.

“Well, we’re gonna find out, aren’t we?”

You roll your eyes and continue exploring with your idiot boyfriend. You have no idea what you're looking for, but you don't find it. Maybe it's hidden under a goddamn foot of dust! You can't take too long, either. The maid only gave you three hours, and there's no telling how many rooms and cupboards are in this place. After a quick sweep (visual, not actual. You pity the poor fucker that tries to take a broom to this place) you head up to the second floor. Oh Arkay, the dust is even thicker up there then it was downstairs. You can't even see to the end of the hallway.

But it's the only way you can go. You and John walk forward together and suddenly you feel your stomach lurch. The world spins and for a moment you're certain you're going to faint. You end up falling to your knees, gasping for breath.

Then you realize that if you had done that a second ago you would only have succeeded in giving yourself a horrendous coughing fit. Now the air is clear. Instead of the old wooden floor you're kneeling upon soft green grass. Instead of your traveling clothes you find yourself wearing velvet. Then you realize your belt is gone, which means your weapons are gone, your potions are gone, and your money's gone.

Then you look to your left and realize that John is gone too.

People are talking up ahead. Well, shit, it's not like you have any other idea what to do. You get up and walk towards the source of the sound. The path you're on widens into a field. Through the heavy fog you see a table covered with food, and not just the common stuff. It's all massive cakes, beautiful large chunks of meat, and strange woven breads. Two figures sit across from one another.

You've never seen either of these men in your life. One is fairly unremarkable, even if he's dressed in fine crimson robes. If you had to guess, you'd say he's a half elf leaning towards the Imperial
side of the family. He's got pointed ears and blond hair but wider nose and lips than you'd expect on an elf. And the other man... Well you're not really sure where to start with him. He's tall and slim, talking to the other man with a great booming voice. He's got a large almost triangular nose with a huge moustache, and his white hair has been kind of pushed back, but it still sticks out at odd angles. Your eyes refuse to focus on his clothes. All you get is a weird mix of shape and color that won't sit still. His eyes burn white and red and yellow and blue, changing each time he blinks.

“What’s this?” He roars. “Can’t you see I’m busy? Can’t a Daedric prince visit an old friend in peace for a few decades? Who sent you? Was it Molag? No, no... Little Tim, the toymaker’s son? The ghost of King Lysandus? Or was it... Yes! Stanley, that talking grapefruit from Passwall!”

“Uh, no,” you say, unsure of who any of those people are or what a grapefruit even is, “I just kind of wandered in here by mistake...”

“Well it’s a rather big mistake, lad.” His voice goes soft and smooth. "Anything could happen in the mind of a mad emperor. You could be turned into cheese, have your entrails taken out and skipped rope with, become a pretty princess. The possibilities are limitless. Although, with Pelly it’s more likely to be something foul.”

“Look, I'm sorry I interrupted you. Can you just tell me how to get out of here and I'll go and you can go back to talking.”

“Are you sure that's what you want? You're not interested in seeing your friend again?”

"What?"

“Oh, I'm sorry, did ya just happen to walk into a long sealed off part of the palace with that Imperial for no reason? And here I thought you cared about him. He certainly cares about you…”

“Where is he?!” You snap.

“Ah, there’s the reaction I was hoping for.”

You take a deep breath. "Please, just tell me where he is."

“Well, you see that might be a little on the tricky side to explain to someone from the mortal plane. He’s here. But he’s not here. But if you do what I want I might just give him back to you. Here, take this.”

There’s a poof and there's a rush of heat in your hand. Suddenly it melts away and you feel a smooth grain of wood beneath your fingers. You look down to see a long oak staff with three different faces carved into it: one happy, one angry, and one sad. You've heard the stories but…

"Are you who I think you are?” You ask.

"That depends. If you think I'm your grandmother, no. Or at least probably not. If you think I'm the daedric prince of madness, then you're on to something."

"Yeah. I guess that makes why kind of a stupid question then, huh?"

Sheogorath smiles down at you. "I mean, I could explain my thought process to you, but I've been told it's hard to follow and it tends to leave mortals as drooling lumps for the rest of their lives. Now, off you go.”

“Go where?”
“Ah, take your pick. There are three paths, three tasks, one Wabbajack.”

You look into the faces of the staff. “And if I finish all of them, you'll give me John back?”

“Hmm? Sure. Why not?”

You grip the staff more tightly and head back off into the fog. Your heart is racing. You have no weapons except for this thing, no armor, and the soles of your boots are so soft you feel every pebble. You hear no birds, no wild animals, nothing but your breath, your heartbeat, and your footsteps.

“Oh, good choice!” Sheogorath’s voice booms from nowhere and everywhere at once, making you jump. “To the arena, my boy!”

For a moment you’re confused, and then you walk up to a waist-high wall. Ahead of you is a deep pit, and across the way you see another balcony just like yours. Three men stand across of you, two of them wearing helmets.

“It’s simple really, your atronach has to be the last standing. After you’ve done that, one task down, two to go.” Oh boy, that voice is unnerving.

“Well then, let’s start!”

Gates on either side of the pit open and atronachs rush out. You stand there, gripping the staff tightly. You have no fucking idea of what you’re supposed to do.

“Are you just gonna stand there, boy? Bo-ring! Maybe I'll just keep the kid for myself after all.”

You squeeze the staff more tightly and a ball of light shoots from the mouth and hits the rocks on the other side. You stare at the smoking staff.

“There you go! Now try it again, and this time don't suck.”

You grip it tightly again and this time try to aim towards the enemy’s atronach. It explodes into a million pieces.

“There!” You shout.

“Ha! Not so fast!”

The door opens again, your atronach transforms, and then you’re back where you were before. You growl and destroy that one as well, only for another to come out.

You’re missing something, you know you’re missing something. There has to be a trick to it…

Then you suddenly realize that if you’re just fighting the daedra, why do you have three opponents? You start shooting at them instead. They’re smaller and further away, which makes it more difficult. Eventually, though, you manage to get a blast in the right direction. Two turn into wolves and attack the remaining man.

“There you go, now was that so bad? Chop, chop, Karkat! We’ve got lots more to do!”

You turn around and don’t look back.

The next task, once you manage to find it, is easier than the last. Hit the boy, hit the monster. Hit the boy, hit the monster. Your aim is getting significantly better as well. You barely even have to
think to use the staff. It’s almost like it’s become an extension of your arm.

This frees your mind to think, about these tasks, about John.

There’s something about this that doesn’t feel right to you. Why is John being held while Sheogorath has you do this? You’re not special, not interesting, and you’ve never even wielded a staff. John’s the magic dragonborn; you're just Karkat.

You want to question it directly, want to ask what the fuck is going on and why, but you're afraid of confronting him. What if he goes back on his side of the deal for your insolence? No, you're not even going to consider that.

Sheogorath’s voice interrupts your thoughts. “Well done, boy! One task left, off with you now!”

Perhaps he just doesn’t have a reason. He’s the prince of madness, not the prince of well thought out and cohesive ideas, after all. But either way there’s not much you can do with it. You turn and head back to his table.

The next and final one is even easier. All you have to do is shoot both of the Palagius…es, until eventually yours wins. You’ve really gotten the hang of the wabbajack. It takes all of thirty seconds for you to finish the final task. When you hear Sheogorath’s booming voice you don’t jump. You knew it was coming and you can’t help but smile. You’re getting John back. You’re going to get him back!

"Alright," you say as you return to the meadow. "I've finished. Now let both of us go."

Sheogorath snorts. “You wanted what?”

“You said you’d give John back!” You shout.

“I say lots of things, lad. You’ve treated Pelagius, sure, but did you ever think that maybe your friend didn’t?”

“What?”

“You performed up to expectations, but he hasn’t done anything. So you can go home, sure. But I think perhaps I'll keep him around. Don't worry, you can have him back in a few hundred years. How long do you elves live again?"

You clench the staff more tightly. “Let me do whatever you wanted him to do, then. Whatever it takes.”

“Hmm… nah.”

“You fucking-”

And then without thinking you thrust your arm forward and you shoot a god with his own weapon. The sky above you, the grass below you, and the rocks around you shatter unto blackness.

What the fuck did you just do?

Suddenly the pieces stop flying away. They reverse, color and texture changing. And then you’re standing in a massive throne room. You look around and blink.

“Hey, Karkat!”
You spin on your heel and see a massive golden table lined with dozens of chairs made from all sorts of strange twisted shapes. And just sitting there, completely relaxed, is John Egbert. You’re so shocked you drop the Wabbajack.

“I was wondering when you were gonna get here!” He says, beaming.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Well, I mean, I didn’t think the tasks were *that* hard. And you really need more target practice ’cause your aim kinda sucks.”

“You knew?”

“Well, yeah. Why did you think I wanted to go to the palace so bad?”

“You *knew from the start*?!”

“Uh….”

You march up to John glaring at him harshly. You want to hit him. He would deserve it for all this. For making you lie through your teeth to get here, for making you crawl through a hall so dusty you're probably going to get permanent lung damage, for scaring you so badly when you thought he'd been kidnapped by a god forever. He stares up at you, bright blue eyes wide. Then you grab him by his stupid silk shirt and kiss him with everything you have.

When you pull away he starts laughing, but his isn’t the only voice you hear.

At the head of the table you see Sheogorath, who is completely doubled over and consumed with guffawing laughter.

“I like you boy,” he says, ”You almost remind me of me when I was younger. Maybe a little less of a sense of humor, but close enough. Oh, John, I’m so glad you've got better taste in partners than your father.”

“So are we approved?” John asks.

“Yeah. So Karkat, don’t hurt the kid. I like him; takes after my side of the family.”

“What?” You ask, eloquent as usual.

“Oh, right! John, I know you lost my stuff and feel bad about it, so take this,” Sheogorath waves his hand and suddenly a massive blue and gold hammer appears on the table.

"Ooh…” He lifts it and holds it up in the light. It's weird, with a pointy bit above the hammer part of the handle, like someone took a strange geometric idol and shoved it onto an already gaudy spear. A strange elongated M is written on the side.

“That one’s much better than that old piece of crap I made all those years ago *and* it's blood bound summonable, just like the spork. I call it the Pop-a-matic Vrillyhoo, one of my best pieces of work if I do say so myself. Think of it as a late coming of age present.”

“Cool!” John lifts it up, grinning widely. “Thanks a lot, Colonel!”

“What?” You ask again.

“Oh, and you can keep the Wabbajack, kiddo. Nice work. Anyway, I’m sure I’ll see you both in a
few decades."

"Yeah! Tell Nana I said hi!"

"I will when she gets back from The Fringe. Ah, now off with ya!"

This time there's a flash and you're back in the old wing in Solitude.

"What?!"

"Haha, come on, Karkat! Let's get out before we get locked in!"

He grabs your hand and pulls you out of the wing, out of the castle, and into the street.

"Okay, we're out!" You shout as he continues tugging you along. "Now tell me what the hell just happened!"

He slows down. "Uh, we should probably get back to the inn first. Might not be the best stuff for people to hear, you know?"

You sigh. "Alright, fine. But you will give me answers."

"Yeah, I promise."

He doesn't let go of your hand, but starts walking at a much more reasonable pace. Without thinking you lace your fingers together. Wait, should you have done that? Is it too mixed-messagey? Well, he did promise he'd talk to you, so you're supposed to reward that kind of thing right?

Dammit, Karkat, you're over thinking this.

You and John get upstairs and sit down on the bed facing each other.

"So," he says, nibbling at his lower lip, "um, what exactly do you want to know?"

"Okay, how about start at the top. Are you actually related to him? And you called him Colonel at the end there. Is that the same Colonel you always talk about?"

"Yes and yes."

"How does that even work?"

He runs his fingers through his hair. "Well, I think I've given you some of the details before, right? So you know he was in the army before the Oblivion Crisis, got court-martialed for 'gross misconduct,' but he wouldn't say what exactly he did, and wound up in jail. He served around a year and then he vanished. The guards started looking for him, but then the Oblivion Crisis started and he wound up closing a bunch of the gates and saving a lot of people all over Cyrodiil, including the people at Battlehorn Castle."

"But the god part?" You ask.

"Well, he didn't used to be a god. He did all that stuff when he was still a normal human. So he's got the reputation that he closed all the oblivion gates, but then he hears there's another one in a place called Niben Bay. Of course he's curious, because how does that work when Mehrunes Dagon was supposed to be banished for all eternity. So he goes there, and turns out it's possible because this gate is to the Shivering Isles because there's this weird battle there at the end of every
era, and basically the guy who used to be Sheogorath turned into Jyggalag and the Colonel got to be the replacement. But he'd promised to protect Battlehorn, and daedra are super serious about their promises, so he spent like sixty years going back and forth between Nirn and the Shivering Isles, which probably got really annoying after a while."

"But why have kids? Why not use a loophole and just bring everyone into the Shivering Isles?"

He blinks at you. "Honestly, I never thought of that. I donno if he did and just didn’t feel like doing that or what. Instead he found a warrior princess just over the border in Hammerfell, married her, and had two kids to help with the castle. And they were mostly human, so they got married and had kids and then their kids had kids, and one of those was my dad so here I am."

"Is that where that power you used just outside of Winterhold came from? Because you're... part Daedra?" That feels weird to say.

He nods. "Mm-hmm!"

"What else can you do?" You ask excitedly.

"Not much," he admits. "Other than that it's all little things. Extra strength and durability, higher natural magical affinity, that kind of stuff. But there are a few issues that come with it too. For now... let's just say I accidentally set a lot of stuff on fire when I was a kid." He summons a tiny flame on the tip of his finger. "But I've got it all pretty well under control on this point."

You briefly imagine a tiny John running around in a field, accidentally throwing fireballs. It's actually slightly adorable. Oh, you wish time travel existed. "And what did he mean when he said we were approved?"

"That means as far as he's concerned you're allowed to be part of the family." He blushes. "I mean, uh, you don't have to be. Honestly, it might have been a bit early, but as long as the Wabbajack doesn't mysteriously disappear it means he doesn't mind us being together."

"Early?"

He takes a deep breath. "Don't freak out, but normally we don't put partners through trials until like the second month of handfasting. That's why he said he'd see both of us in a few decades."

"So why now?" You ask.

"I wasn't gonna mention this unless you asked, but... It's because of last night." He smiles sheepishly at you. "I knew I had to do something to try to make it up to you, and I thought maybe if I let you run the trials alone it would show I trusted you. Normally people get hints, but..."

"But you decided to send me in unprepared and terrified to face off against a fucking god."

"Because I knew you could do it?" He keeps the smile on his face, but there's uncertainty in it now, like he's admitting he had tried to make you dinner but accidentally dumped it in the fire.

You shake your head and embrace him. "Maybe you do take after his side of the family. You're completely insane."

"Yeah," he admits sadly.

"But I'm back here with you, so I guess that means I'm crazy too."
He laughs and squeezes you tightly. You actually let him pull you into his lap for maximum snuggles. It’s then you decide that, yeah, this is totally okay.

john: oh my god this happens all the time!

KARKAT: YEAH, BUT SHENANIGANS NEVER ENSUE. HE’S LIKE 110% FOCUSED IN BATTLE AND THEN THE SECOND WE’RE SAFE HE’S LIKE “OH, LET’S CHASE FUCKING BUTTERFLIES AND FOXES OH WHOOPS THAT IS MY FACE ON THE GROUND.”

john: hehehe. you love it.

john: actually not really. i usually sleep like a log!

KARKAT: I HAD A DREAM WHERE I WAS KILLED BY A FLYING LIGHTNING WOLF. DOES THAT COUNT?

john: oh i hope not. i don’t want you getting killed by electric wolves.

KARKAT: I DON’T EVEN THINK THOSE ARE THINGS.

john: did you think dragons were things before this happened?

KARKAT: … POINT TAKEN.
Chapter 7

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

Chapter Notes

a bit shorter this time.

I finished rereading the whole rough draft, so I should be able to post one a week or so. But it's still not too late to change things, so if any of you guys have any feedback it would be super appreciated!

'Til next week!

TIRDAS 30TH HEARTHFIRE 4E201

JOHN'S BEEN KEEPING UP WITH THE WHOLE TRUSTING ME THING SURPRISINGLY WELL. WE MADE IT TO THE STATUE TO MERIDA AND NOT ONLY DID HE ACT LIKE I FUCKING KNEW WHAT I WAS DOING, FOR A WHILE HE WAS LETTING ME LEAD PROPERLY. MAYBE THE PART WHERE I WAS PULLED INTO THE FUCKING SKY BY A BIG-ASS PILLAR OF LIGHT HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH IT. THAT HAD TO BE PRETTY FUCKING IMPRESSIVE, EVEN TO MISTER DRAGONBORN.

THE TEMPLE WAS PRETTY FUCKING ROUGH TO CLEAR OUT. I WAS EXPECTING SKELETONS, OR GHOSTS, OR DRAUGR, YOU KNOW, SOMETHING THAT HAS BECOME ABLE TO FIT INTO MY TWISTED UNDERSTANDING OF NORMAL. INSTEAD, WE GOT THESE WEIRD BLACK BLOBBY GHOSTS THAT WERE SUPER TOUGH. BUT THEY ALL HAD LIKE FIFTY GOLD ON THEM, SO THAT'S BASICALLY JOHN'S WHOLE SET OF ARMOR PAID FOR. AND THEN AT THE END OF THE DUNGEON THERE WAS A SWORD CALLED DAWNBREAKER. WE WERE JUST PLANNING ON PAWNING IT OFF LATER, BUT THEN WHEN I TOOK IT IT CHANGED, SO NOW I HAVE AN ENCHANTED UNDEAD-KILLING SICKLE, WHICH IS PRETTY SWEET. I WONDER IF THERE ARE ANY OTHER DAEDRIC WEPONS THAT CAN DO THAT. A GUY CAN DREAM, RIGHT?

WE'RE CAMPING OUT ON THE MOUNTAIN TONIGHT, BUT TOMORROW WE'RE HEADING SOUTHWEST TO A PLACE CALLED DRAGON BRIDGE. HOPEFULLY THERE'LL BE SOMEWHERE TO SELL THIS STUFF.

“Awaken, my champion, or you shan’t have the chance again.”

You startle and sit up in your bedroll. John is still sleeping peacefully beside you. At first you think you must have just been having a weird dream. (According to John, having a Daedric Prince in your head tends to fuck things up for a while. And now you've had three of them there.) But then you hear the familiar growl of draugr. You grab your new weapon and attack. The draugr begins to smoke. You shove it backwards into its friends and it explodes in a ball of fire.

John jumps at the noise. “What the fuck?!”
"We’re being attacked!"

He shoves his bedroll to the side and grabs his hammer just in time for two more to approach you. Now that you’re both awake they’re not much of a challenge.

"Where did they come from?" John demands as the last draugr collapses to the ground.

"Hell if I know!" you shout. "I thought we cleared out the temple."

"We did! There has to be something else."

"What do you think we should do?" you ask.

"Well, it’s not safe for us to sleep here right now. We have to find where they’re coming from."

John casts magelight, and the two of you quickly gather up your supplies, get dressed, and head out.

Something about this feels wrong. There aren’t supposed to be any ruins in this part of Skyrim. At least not any big enough to have draugr. And it’s not like them to leave their territory. The two of you are about to give up the hunt and call it a freak accident when you stumble upon a pair of skeletons guarding the entrance to an otherwise unremarkable cave. Well that warrants investigation. John easily takes out the draugr and the two of you slip inside. The cave only becomes more and more conspicuous as you go on. Not only do you find a ridiculous number of undead, but also necromancers fiercely defending their hideout.

There’s still no reason you can see for all of them to be there, but you start to feel a strange sensation in your stomach, cold and harsh. You’re afraid and you have no idea why.

Then you find the main chamber. There’s purplish-bluish light filling a massive space. An ancient tower stands in the middle of the cavern. As you and John step forward a woman’s voice fills the air.

“Wolf Queen. Hear our call and awaken. We summon Potema!”

There’s a chorus of voices behind her, repeating the summons.

“Well,” John says, “That’s not good.”

“Understatement of the fucking era,” you grumble.

“We’ve gotta stop them.”

“Damn right we have to stop them!”

Except you’re not sure of how to get down. You carefully slip down the edge of the cliff. Then, of course, John trots right down a ramp you missed completely.

He’s about to make fun of you, but then you get noticed by an Altmer. The ensuing fights are tougher than you expected. Man, you really need to keep working on your sneaking skills.

“How big is this fucking cult anyway?!” You demand as you kill what must be your tenth necromancer.

“Too damn big,” John replies. "We should look into their recruitment strategy."
You give him a look.

"What?"

"How serious are you being right now?"

He snorts as he pulls his warhammer free from a crushed skull. "Not at all."

"Okay, good."

"You have to be related to be part of our cult."

You startle so hard you trip, but a well placed ice-spike from John breaks apart the skeleton that was about to go for you.

But now you’re in the tower properly. The necromancers at the top are still chanting, but then you hear a voice that chills you to your bones. Potema speaks, her voice resonating through the cavern.

“Fools! You think you can bind me?”

“Let’s not find out,” John says, drawing his weapon and running up the stairs.

“Wait, John!”

Then you hear ice spikes hitting steel and panic. When you catch up the necromancers have John surrounded, but you're able to pull one off with a sickle in the shoulder. John manages to land a solid hit on another's chest and break away to summon a flame atronach. Thankfully, the woman who seems to be in charge of the ritual is focused purely on attempting to complete it up until the point that you stab her so picking off her friends isn't too bad.

A few moments more and the light dissipates. The cave is silent. The two of you seem to be safe for the moment.

With the necromancers dead you decide to investigate. For a big scary altar, there’s actually not that much interesting stuff on the top of the tower. The big flower-like glyph upon the floor seems to be painted in blood, but there aren’t any herbs or ancient artifacts you could pick up and take with you. However, a big black book with the same symbol embossed onto its cover catches your eye. This must be where they got the ritual from. But what is it?

You're about to open it when you hear a loud crash behind you. It seems John’s found the leaver to lower a drawbridge that'll take you straight back to the entrance. Well, that'll save some time.

The book can probably wait. You doubt there’s anything all that important in there anyway.

turdas, 2nd frostfall 4e201

so after a long hard day of riding southwards we came across a village. we were so stoked because we thought we’d get a chance for real beds, maybe to sell some of the furs we’d gotten along the way.

but then when we start entering the place we’re suddenly attacked. the people let out fierce battle cries about freeing the reach and reclaiming it in the name of the forsworn (i’m assuming that’s what they call themselves). there must have been dozens of them. karkat and i barely got away and as it was one of the bags fell of the horse so now we've got a lot less loot to sell in markarth.
then as soon as we got away we were attacked by bears. luckily we’re used to those by now. we set up our camp in a sheltered cave behind a waterfall. we’ve got some traps, including a few wards, but we’re going to be taking turns serving as lookout during the night. i don’t know what kind of place this is, but hopefully we can find a real town soon so we can figure out what’s actually going on.

--

When the two of you head out the next day you decide to stick to the main roads. It might be slower and not as interesting, but you figure you’re more likely to get to the next town in one piece. Karkat says that your best bet is probably to head towards Markarth, which is apparently pretty much the only place guaranteed to not be overrun with forsworn. You’re exhausted from staying up half the night, so anywhere with walls sounds pretty good to you.

The first few hours of your journey are rather uninteresting. You’re not even really impressed by the untamed beauty of the province anymore. Then, as you pass a hill, you hear familiar war cries.

“First you, then all of the Reach!”

“Oh fuck no,” Karkat says. “We don’t have time for this!”

“You’re telling me.”

You pull out your weapons and prepare for battle, but the two of you aren’t used to being ambushed. Usually it’s the other way around. It’s all you can do to summon a few daedra to help even out your numbers, but they have daedra of their own. You’ve managed to kill a good number of your attackers, but they just keep coming.

Soon you’re out of magic, out of potions, and almost out of strength. You sincerely doubt that you’d be able to outrun them if you tried. Several pillars of bluish light appear around some of the corpses, which rise up, stacking the odds further against you. You and Karkat brace yourselves for the inevitable.

Then you realize the undead aren’t attacking you. Instead, they’ve turned and began to kill their cohorts. Men drop away one by one, and on the far side of the carnage you see an individual dressed in bright red robes standing tall, their hands glowing purple with magic. The person steps towards the two of you. You lift your hammer back up, getting ready to attack.

But first, the person lifts a hand and calls out to you over the smoking corpses.

“Hey, Karkat!”

Karkat blinks out at the figure, and then shields his eyes and squints. “Aradia? Is that you?”

“Yes!” She throws her hood back, revealing long, black messy hair and grey skin.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Karkat asks, jogging over to her.

“What am I doing here? I’ve been adventuring in the Reach for the better part of a year. There’s so much old dark magic and unlike at the college they don’t care if I’m a necromancer as long as I’m not forsworn.”

“I’m guessing she’s another friend of yours?” You ask Karkat.

“Yeah. She was closer with Sollux and Tavros, but we hung out sometimes.”
“Do you know every dark elf in Skyrim?”

“Well we're not that big of a community,” Aradia says.

“And remember that part where a lot of us scattered? Yeah, that was a thing,” Karkat explains.

"Oh. Right."

“So,” Aradia says, focusing her attention back to Karkat, “Where are you guys heading?”

“Markarth.”

She squeals with excitement and claps. “I’m heading that way too! Got some stuff to sell. Want to stick together?”

“Sure,” Karkat replies with a shrug.

And so you head further west with your new companion at your side.

Having an extra pair of eyes definitely helps you feel more comfortable as you work your way along the road. Aradia and Karkat mostly just talk about their old friends. Apparently she’s trying to get Sollux to come join her out here, but he’s not having any of it. You can’t really blame him for that. This place is fucking crazy. She’s also ecstatic that he talked to Tavros just recently.

…Actually, she seems pretty ecstatic about just about everything. As much as you like Karkat, the positivity is kind of a nice change from Mr. Grumpy Guts.

Even though you can't travel on horseback with three people, you make it to the city gates in a matter of hours. You're about to enter when a man runs up to Aradia.

"Miss Megido!" He cries.

"What is it?"

He bands over and tries to catch his breath. "Just came from… Kolskegger mine. Overrun… by foresworn. Please, help us!"

He looks up at her with hope in his eyes and she grins so widely her face nearly splits in two.

“I’m on it!” she says. “Anyway, it was nice seeing you two again. Have fun in Markarth!”

She runs away back down the road, and you and Karkat go through the gates.

You’ve heard about Markarth’s architecture. Of course you have. An elf doesn’t live in Skyrim his whole life without hearing about the different holds from travelers. But you still weren’t really prepared for how dwarven the city is. All of the high stone walls and golden fixtures are in place, and they're beautiful in the sunlight. Instead of the eerie echoes of normal dwemer ruins, the city bustles with actual civilized life. Is this how it was in all of the cities thousands of years ago? Carts filled with food and other goods, children and dogs running through the streets, guards sitting back against the walls and chattering?

You’re just standing there like an idiot, but John jumps in to start selling. The first booth he approaches is run by a Redguard woman.

"So what can you tell me about this place?" John asks.
“I can say plenty about this town, but I’m guessing you mean in terms of the architecture your friend is staring at?”

“Eh heh, yeah.”

She shrugs. “Honestly, I don’t know very much about the buildings. They’ve just been here since forever and most of us don’t pay them too much mind. You’ll need to go talk to Calcelmo. He can be grouchy, but he knows more about Dwemer than anyone else. He’s up in the keep.”

“Thanks a lot!”

He turns back to you, looks at you for a moment, and then bursts out laughing.

“What?”

“You really wanna go, huh?”

“What?”

“It’s all over your face you dork.”

You blush and push past him without saying a word.

It’s ridiculously easy to get lost in this city. That’s probably what happens when people have been living in the same place for six thousand years and just keep building up on top of each other. A lot of the bridges are out too, and there are areas where the side of the hill has just kind of collapsed making the way impassable. Night has long since fallen when you approach the keep. But finally, fucking finally you make it. The ancient walls tower above you and the torches can barely light the cavernous, crumbling space. You nearly trip on a piece of rubble as you look around, searching for a sign of where the wizard will be. Straight ahead there's dozens of candles and massive banners with the hold's twisted ram's horns embroidered into them. So that's probably the throne room. The right has fewer fragments of stone than the left and appears to be better lit. That's probably your best bet.

However, as you climb the stairs a guard stops you.

“The Dwemer Museum is closed,” he says.

“There’s a museum?” You ask, trying to hide your excitement. John's giggle makes you think you probably failed.

“Of course, but it’s not ready yet. Calcelmo still wants some more artifacts. Come back later.”

“I’m looking for him! Where is he?”

“Not sure, actually. Probably still at his work site across the way. I haven’t seen him come through to bed yet.”

You turn on your heel and rush away. You grab John’s arm to drag him along, paying no heed to his attempts to thank the guard. You have bigger fish to fry.

The excavation site stands before you. And it’s empty. There’s a clear work station, with benches and an enchanting table, but no one’s there.

Your knees feel week and your eyes sting a little bit. All that work, all that effort for nothing. That fucking guard, getting your hopes up. You want to collapse and sob.
But then there’s a warm, heavy weight on your shoulder. You lift your hand to place it over John’s. He squeezes your shoulder lightly.

“It’s okay. We can just come back tomorrow.”

“If we can get here fast enough.”

“Hey, we know where it is. Look, even if he was here I’m exhausted, you’re exhausted, I think we both need to just be done for the night. Let’s get to the inn and find something to eat and drink. Maybe a nice clean bed. Come on.”

“Fine.” You let him lead you out, but refuse to take your eyes off the massive golden door until the last moment.

When you get to the palace the next day you're approached by an Altmer far too young to be the one you’re looking for.

"Can I help you with something?" he asks in the faux-pleasant tone that means he spends way too much of his time trying to deal with people.

"We're looking for Calcelmo," you say.

“Oh, he's my uncle. But if you're trying to sell things we're not interested. On a tight budget with the expedition, you see."

"I don't care about that," you say, "I'm here to talk to him about the dwemer stuff."

He wrinkles his nose. "Ugh, good luck. I'll be back for you in a century or two when he shuts up about it. He's over by the enchanting table." The young altmer points behind him and there he is. you can't see much of his face behind his dark hood, but in your mind you could picture a halo of light around the guy.

You approach him nervously. “Are you Calcelmo?”

“I am.” He turns and you see him. He's ancient, face heavily lined and hair shock white. You'd guess he's well into his two-hundreds. “And who might you be?”

"Karkat Vantas," you reply. “I’m interested in your research.”

“Are you now? You’re awfully young to be interested in things so old.”

“I have my reasons.”

“I’m sure you do.” He turns to you and stares at you hard. “You said your name was Karkat? Where are you from?”

"Windhelm. Not sure it matters, but." "Heh, thought you might be." He turns back to his work, but you could swear you saw a smile tug at the edges of his chapped lips. “Well I’d love to help you, but I’m terribly busy. I’m in charge of curating the artifacts from Nchuand-Zel and I’m afraid I’ve hit a snag.”

You feel as though you’ve swallowed a lump of lead. “What kind of snag?”

“A large spider that my workers call Nimhe, the Poisoned one, is blocking off our attempts to get
back into the ruins.”

“Well can’t you just kill it?” John asks.

“I’m afraid my nephew and I are too busy and my men just aren’t capable of it. Perhaps if the two of you helped me I would be able to help you in return.”

"Yeah, we should be able to handle that!"

"I was hoping you'd say that. Take this.” He offers you a key. “This should let you in to the excavation site. Return once Nimhe is dead and I’d be happy to show you my research.”

"Really?" You ask.

"Of course. It's just nice to see that there are some elves,” he glances over towards his nephew, "actually interested in this kind of thing. I wish you luck.

With a quick thanks, you take the key and lead the way inside.

But, oh wow, this part of the keep is in even worse shape than the outside. The vast majority of the walls have crumbled, and it’s not long before you start seeing spider webs everywhere. Gross. Nimhe is a big nasty brute, but at the end of the day she's just a spider. You've killed more of them than you'd care to count.

There’s a dead imperial soldier lying on the ground before a massive set of golden doors. Beside him is a note and John stoops to read it. As he does, he knits his brows.

“What is it?” You ask, wiping spider juice from your sickles.

“There are more researchers inside,” he says. “We’ve got to get them out.”

“If there’s anything to get out,” you say.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“If there's really a big cut-off city in there, there’s no way falmer haven’t taken over.”

“And they're going to have more of those bug things?”

“Probably.”

John shivers and swallows. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Now this, this is more like it. Behind this set of doors is Nchuand-Zel in all its untapped beauty. The air is damp and heavy, thick with the odor of falmer and blood, but the view is worth it. Spiraling ramps fill the space and soft blue light emanates seemingly from the stone itself.

You smile at John. The two of you have a dungeon to crawl.

Loredas, 11th Frostfall, 4e201

Today marks a week since those boys disappeared into Nchuand-Zel. I have little hope of ever seeing the two of them again. It seems likely they’ve gone the same way as so many of my other researchers. Shame, too. The Dunmer had a lot of potential. Perhaps I should have told him what I know first, though it hardly would have been of any use against a spider.
If only this work wasn’t so important. I must continue, but the question is how…

Karkat comes back exhausted. He practically crawls his way back to the campsite like he’s been doing for the past few days. Or at least you think it’s been days. In the constant soft glow of Dwarven technology you’ve lost all track of time.

After he clears your trap ring you obligingly cast a new frost rune so you’ll be safe when you let your guard down.

“Find anything fun?” You ask as you hand him a big chunk of dried meat.

“Not really. I think I might have gotten everything worth getting. There’s not much more I can figure on my own. I know how to read the stuff back east, but this is a different dialect so who the hell even knows? We should probably head back soon. I know this has to be about as interesting as counting snowflakes for you.”

You shrug. “Hey, you sat through the stuff at the college. It’s only fair. Let’s just hope the next place we get holed up in will have something for both of us.”

"Nah, then things would be too easy and we'd never leave," he says. “How are we doing on food, by the way?”

“Well, that was the last of the meat. We still have a little bread and cheese we can share tomorrow morning.”

“Oh… I guess we really do have to leave then.”

He stares deeply into the fire, arms wrapped around his knees. Sitting like that he looks so tiny, so lost… You go over and plop down next to him, wrapping one arm around his shoulder so you can hold him close. He lets out a soft sigh and leans into the touch.

“What have you been looking for anyway?” You ask. "You still haven’t told me.”

“Like I said, I don’t really know,” he shrugs as well as he can while he’s pressed up next to you.

“Come on, you gotta have some idea.”

“You’ll think it's stupid.”

"Try me, dude. You've heard plenty of my shitty ideas."

He sighs. "Okay, fine. I'm trying to figure out what happened to my mom." You sit still and listen, not wanting him to lose his nerve. "She disappeared eighteen years ago and no one's heard from her since, so I know the odds are really bad. And all I really know is that she was interested in the Dwemer and the falmer. So while we're going through these ruins I keep hoping for some kind of sign she was here. Maybe if I'm lucky I'll find her body and be able to look over her field notes so I can find out what was so fucking important.”

"You think she's dead?"

"I think it's pretty fucking likely. Dad and Kankri both make it seem like she was super torn up about leaving, so I don't think she was just running away and getting a farm somewhere. And if she's still alive she'd be pushing sixty and you're not gonna last too long in this kind of environment at that age."
You hug him a bit more tightly. He's quiet, and a quiet Karkat is a Karkat that's thinking way too hard about depressing stuff. You shouldn't have pushed him. You gotta fix that.

"Hey, hey Karkat. You know how we can tell the Dwarves were civilized?" you ask.

"Because they had fucking baths in Skyrim?" He asks.

"Because they had fucking baths in Skyrim. Like, the only one on the surface here is in Solitude and I don't understand. Literally everywhere else in the Empire a place as big as Riverwood would have one of its own. Even in Hammerfell, which is like all desert. You guys have so much water and you're not even doing anything with it!"

"John, you do realize we've had this conversation like every day since you found the bathhouse."

"Because it's important. And I like being clean. This way we can snuggle without gagging."

He snorts and sits back up, "yeah, you were acting so repulsed back in Winterhold."

"Just because washbasins work in a pinch doesn't mean baths aren't better."

"You're a total dick."

"Hey, you kissed me first," You say.

"Yeah, but you started coming on to me," he points out, leaning back against you.

"I guess it's 'cause I love you," you say.

He startles and, oh shit. It's been a month, is it still too early to say that? It's not like you've been thinking that and aching to say it every day for weeks, but he's just staring at you, oh fuck…

"I love you too, dork." He says, settling back down against your chest.

You sigh happily and begin running your fingers through his hair. Life is good.

Talos fuck it’s bright out now that you're topside. It’s bright and hot and the sun is reflecting right off of John’s shiny fucking armor into your eyes. You emerged from the ruins yesterday, only to find that it was pouring outside. Thankfully, it cleared up this morning and you had the chance to sell some of your loot and then head out.

As much as you loved Nchuand-Zel, you can’t hide your relief when you finally step out of Markarth. That place has more problems than a skeever that wandered into the lair of a mountain troll with raging hemorrhoids. Normally you'd be worried about the Foresworn, but you ran into Aradia on your way out and she decided to come with you. With a super powerful necromancer at your side, a few rebels don’t seem like too much of a threat.

You and Aradia were never really all that close, but it's still nice to have an old friend along for the ride, especially since she’s really gotten to know this part of Skyrim. The three of you head south, Aradia showing you shortcuts and talking about some of her old adventures. The majority of animals and bandits turn around and walk away when they see her, which is pretty great. Somehow, you manage to make it a whole day without getting into any trouble.

Midmorning the next day Aradia takes you a little off the main road. You find yourself going along
a small dirt path, heading towards a door carved in the side of a mountain.

"What is this place?" you ask.

"Valtume! It's an ancient nord tomb. It's been on my to-explore list for a good long while now! I've heard there might be some great stuff in there. Would either of you mind if we just pop in?"

You and John look at each other and shrug. Yeah, there is no such thing as just 'popping in' to a Nordic tomb, but you're still making awesome time getting back to Whiterun, and it's probably worth a look.

"Sure," John says, "might be fun."

"Yay!" Aradia throws the door open and rushes in, John hot on her heels.

Maybe you shouldn't have let the two of them get together… But you can't let them get too far ahead. They might hurt themselves or get to all of the cool old shit first, and you can’t have that. But before you get too far there's an odd cold breeze. Caves are always a bit chilly, but by this point in the year they should be warmer than the air outside. Something's not right.

“Leave, stranger,” a voice says. “Evil stirs in this place. I fear for the security of the very land if it should break free.”

“Ooh, what kind of evil?” John asks excitedly.

A blueish silver cloud of mist rolls along the floor of the cave, and condenses itself into the form of a man. "This is neither the time nor the place for games, child," he says. "This is no normal cavern, and no normal haunting. It is Hevnoraak, a lich who has been held here for centuries, preserved with ancient necromancy and time magics.”

“Well, sounds like kind of an average day,” John says. “How do we kill him?”

The ghost blinks, “you are either very brave, very stupid, or both.”

"Both," you say quickly.

"Hey!"

“Hmm…” The ghost strokes his beard. "Perhaps you can help me after all. I have been doing all I can to keep him here, but I am weakening. If you travel to the depths of this tomb and gather three opaque vessels he can be released in a weakened state. If you defeat him I will pass on my knowledge, then perhaps I can rest."

"Maybe tell us a bit more about him?" Aradia asks.

"Does it really matter?" You ask her, "Undead is undead."

"Be not so quick to dismiss Hevnoraak," the ghost says. "You were not the first to challenge him, and if you believe him to be so easily defeated neither shall you be the last."

"Okay, fine." You sit on a nearby rock. "What do we need to know to beat this guy?

The ghost takes a long deep breath and starts to speak. Oh gods, you're going to have to sit through his whole life story, won't you? "My name was once Valdar dead-raiser. I served Hevnoraak once as his apprentice in necromancy, he in turn served the dragons all nords worshipped for the protection they could offer and the magic that they taught. Much magic that was once well-known
throughout Nirn has been lost, as all who look upon the vast cities of the Dwemer know. However, perhaps the most grievous loss was that of duration, time magic."

"Wait, so time magic is real?" John asks excitedly. "Like people can go back and change stuff or go forward and see stuff or-?"

Aradia shushes him and Valdar continues. "Those of us who worked in conjuration, the necromancers and the daedra summoners, were also ardent students of duration. We sought ways to preserve the strength of our spells, and many also sought ways to preserve or lengthen their lives. Restoration can, of course, extend one's lifespan, but there are still limits. Only two methods actually exist to keep one on Nirn forever, though neither can be safely called true life. One was granted by the Dragons, and the other from Daedra. From these origins, both a twisted mix of conjuration and duration magics, come the two free undead you know today: draugr and vampires. Draugr at the time were different than they are now. Today you see shriveled bodies and bones, but in the Merethic era, before the Nordic embalming failed, they looked normal and continued to act as living beings."

You're not sure where he's going with this exactly, and you kind of want to ask, but you can't find a place to interrupt him.

And so he continues, "In time, eight draugr rose to power in Skyrim, and several more in other places. They served the dragons who had given them their knowledge as priests. For a time they served the people, but eventually they became ambitious, self-righteousness. The vampires may have been born corrupt thanks to Molag-Bal, but the dragon priests grew to be that way. They abused their power over the people, and in time there came to be war between men and dragons. Although I was born to serve the dragonpriests, by the end I had switched sides. I entombed my former master at the cost of my own life. Since then I have waited, watched what I could of the changing world. But my control of duration was never as strong as Hevnoraak’s was, for by my birth the tradition had already begun to die as the masters became less and less inclined to teach. And so my power fades. If we are to keep him from returning and creating more draugr he must be stopped. And perhaps you three will be the ones to do it."

Aradia smiles. “So it's really true! I read a few books while I was at the mage's college. Urag gro-Shub thought they were fairy tales, but it looks like they weren’t! Now, Mr. Valdar? If we help you destroy Hevnoraak, will you teach me what you know of duration?"

"I can teach you a few tricks I know. Does that mean you’re willing to help me?"

Aradia smiles. “Consider it done! Let’s go!”

"Wait, wasn't he going to teach us how to fight the lich?" You ask.

"Oh, that's right," the ghost says. "To become a proper lich, Hevnoraak had to drain his own blood and store it in three vessels. They were placed with him in his burial chamber. Most of the priests had their blood spilled back into the earth long ago, but not Hevnoraak's. As long as his remains contained in these vessels, he cannot be truly killed."

"You couldn't have just told us that?" You demand.

Valdar strokes his beard. "I suppose I could have, but after a few thousand years as a ghost the mind does become a bit muddled."

"Fucking oblivion!"
"Karkat, be nice!" John says, elbowing you. "Okay, we'll be back soon!" He turns and heads deeper into the cavern.

"You just want to learn more spells," you grumble, "Don't act like I don't know."

"Come on, look at Aradia. See how happy she is?"

"Yeah, Karkat, look how happy I am!"

Yeah, you decide, getting your sickles ready. You definitely shouldn't have put these two together.

FREDAS, 17TH FROSFALL, 4E201

SO MUCH FOR MAKING GOOD TIME. THIS IS DAY TWO IN VALTHUME. ARADIA REALLY WANTS TO LEARN THIS TIME MAGIC SHIT, BUT SHE’S LEAVING JOHN IN THE DUST WHICH IS REALLY FUCKING FUNNY TO SEE, SO THAT’S SOMETHING. ESPECIALLY SINCE HIS WOUNDED PRIDE MEANS THAT THEY'RE NOT SO DAMN INCORRAGABLE TOGETHER. BUT YEAH, HE CAN’T EVEN MAKE MILK SOUR AND SHE’S DOUBLED THE TIME SHE CAN KEEP A SKELETON RAISED. BUT NOW SHE’S LEARNED ALL VALDAR CAN TEACH HER, SO WE’RE GONNA BE HEADING OUT TOMORROW.

I’M NOT SURE ABOUT THIS TIME MAGIC STUFF. I KNOW JOHN JUST THINKS I’M BEING A DUMB NORD, BUT I’M PRETTY DAMN SURE THERE’S JUST SOMETHING INHERENTLY FUCKED UP ABOUT CHANGING THE FABRIC OF THE GODDAMN UNIVERSE. BESIDES, LOOK WHAT HAPPENED TO THE DRAGON PRIESTS. THEY MESSSED WITH TIME AND NOW THEY'RE ALL CREEPY FLOATING SKELETONS THAT SIT AROUND AND WAIT FOR ADVENTURERS TO MURDER. SO THANK AZURA JOHN'S NOT INTO IT.

IF I EVER HAVE TO DEAL WITH SOMEONE WHO ACTUALLY SPECIALIZES IN TIME IT WOULD BE AN ETERNITY TOO SOON.

…I’M NOT SURE IF THAT’S A PUN OR NOT. FUCK IT, I’M GOING TO SLEEP.

Anonymous said:
Tread lightly Karkat, The Princes seem to have favored you

KARKAT: YOU KNOW? I THINK MAYBE YOU’RE RIGHT.
KARKAT: …KIND OF A NICE CHANGE

wiccanapprentice said:
How's Dawnbreaker working for you, Karkat? Is it a decent weapon?
KARKAT: YEAH! IT'S BEEN WORKING GREAT! I'M REALLY FUCKING EXCITED ABOUT THIS. MAYBE I'LL BE ABLE TO KEEP UP A BIT BETTER NOW.
loredas, 18th frostfall 4e201

so we got this tip back in morthal about trying to clear out a place called lost valley redoubt, and it was on the way so we stopped off there this morning. karkat said it’s kind of dumb to follow instructions from people i’ve never met, but i figured there were probably more bandits or necromancers or other fiends that need crushing! besides, it's not like we ever go into ruins without assuming everything's a trap anyway.

it turned out to be more foresworn, and i'm still not sure how to feel about them. like they're kind of like bandits, but they're also kind of just like living in little tribal communities. apparently they've figured out how to make friends with the hagravens too. maybe if they didn't attack us on sight we could actually learn something from each other. but I guess that’s something to worry about later.

oh! but they had another one of those big word walls in there. and there was more of the annoying hard to ignore chanting, but at least getting close enough to a wall makes it go away. this might actually be dragonborn magic stuff and not just normal hearing voices stuff because after the chanting stopped i suddenly knew the first word of another shout. for some reason i couldn’t say it, though, just like when we were in bleak falls barrow. but i figured out the word from bleak falls barrow after i killed a dragon, so maybe if i kill another dragon then i'll be able to learn this one? but i didn't have any other words to understand after i killed the last dragon. maybe if i can somehow get back in and tap into its power. i'll have to try that later. dragonborn magic sure is weird!

it was really hot today, though, especially for the middle of fall in skyrim. luckily there was a nice calm stretch of river with a big old waterfall nearby. after we got rid of all the foresworn we decided to relax and take a swim. after a while aradia suggested jumping off the waterfall, and it was super fun! then a ghost showed up. what is it with having aradia around and ghosts? but he taught us some really funny jokes and hung out for a while, so it was fine in the end. we're gonna camp out here tonight and head out again tomorrow.

you know, i’ve really missed just hanging out and having fun. i almost forgot how cute karkat is when he smiles. like really smiles because he's just relaxed and happy and… it's nice. i wish i could keep him like that forever.

Aradia is a unusually quiet over dinner and you're not sure what to make of it. She’s usually ecstatic over any news, good or bad. You sincerely doubt she's tired. You haven’t really had much of a long day, although perhaps the swimming was a bit of extra exertion. But, of course, the moment you decide not to worry she speaks up.

“I think this will be our last night together,” she says.

“What?” John demands. “I was just getting to know you.”

“Perhaps.” She purses her lips for a moment, thinking of how to phrase her next statement. “But we’re nearing the boarder with Falkreath and I need to stay here. I have a job to do.”

“What do you mean?” You ask. “Aradia, we just met up with you.”
"I know, and I really enjoyed spending time with you both! But the Reach is in chaos. Someone needs to stay here, and I don’t think it can be the two of you. You’ve got greater destinies to fulfill!"

You scoff. “Well, John maybe does.”

“Don’t give yourself such a hard time!” John says, smacking you lightly.

“He’s right. There are important things both of you still have to do in this world, I’m sure of it.”

“We’re gonna miss you, though.” John smiles back at her looking a little lost, a little sad.

“Don’t worry! I’m sure we’ll meet again.” When she says things in that tone of voice, it’s hard to keep any sort of doubt in your mind. So you just roll your eyes and take another bite of stew.

---

KARKAT: …

john: well to tell the truth, we-

KARKAT: DON’T FUCKING ANSWER THEM! IT’S NONE OF YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS, NUMBNUTS! WHAT I DO WITH MY BOYFRIEND IS BETWEEN HIM AND ME. AND EVEN IF WE DID COPULATE AND IT WAS BRAIN-EXPLODINGLY AMAZING I WOULDN’T TELL YOU!

john: karkat! *blush*

KARKAT: I WILL LEAVE IT AT THAT. IF YOU SO WISH YOU CAN IMAGINE THE LIAISONS BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE BUT I WILL NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS GIVE A SHITBRANED COWFUCKER LIKE YOU THE SATISFACTION OF KISSING AND TELLING.

aradia: actually i can tell you they haven’t! both of them have secretly been telling me how pent up they feel because they want to do something but they're not quite ready and-

KARKAT: SHOOOOOOSH!

aradia: :D hehehe

---

SUNDAS 19TH FROSTFALL, 4E201

WE SAID GOODBYE TO ARADIA THIS MORNING AND CONTINUED EAST. IT’S BEEN REALLY QUIET AND SUBDUED WITHOUT HER SO WE DECIDED NOT TO DO ANY DUNGEON DIVING TODAY, BUT BECAUSE OF THAT WE MADE GREAT TIME. LAKE KLINALTH ISN’T TOO FAR AWAY, SO WE SHOULD EASILY REACH ILINALTA’S DEEP TOMORROW.
FUCK, WITH ALL THE HORSESHIT THAT’S BEEN GOING ON I HAVEN’T REALLY THOUGHT THAT MUCH ABOUT WHAT WE’RE DOING. I STILL DON’T KNOW IF I QUITE BELIEVE THAT AZURA’S STAR IS IN THERE. GUESS WE’LL FIND OUT.

JOHN MANAGED TO DISTRACT ME MOST OF THE EVENING, THOUGH, DAMN HIM AND HIS PERFECT SMILE AND SOFT LIPS AND MUSCULAR BODY THAT’S SO AMAZING FOR CUDDLING. DAMN HIM TO THE MOST WRETCHED PLANE OF OBLIVION. I AM ABSOLUTELY NOT GOING TO RUSH HIM, BUT I REALLY HOPE HE’S READY SOON. BECAUSE DAMN.

morndas, 20th frostfall 4e201

aaaaand just for a change, today we fought necromancers. again. some more. guh, why are there so many necromancers in this part of skyrim? but at least these guys were a little interesting!

apparently they’d been doing some weird experiments. a couple of them mentioned a failed one and needing a new sacrifice, but then they noticed us so we couldn’t find out any more.

then when we finally got to the end and karkat saw the star sitting there he was so excited i’m pretty sure he almost peed himself. his hands were shaking so badly he nearly dropped the torch and he had tears in his eyes. honestly, this kind of thing probably isn’t good for his heart, or at least that’s what my dad would say, but he’s just so happy! the star’s not in good shape though. it has a few pieces broken off and it’s a weird blackish color, so i hope aranea can fix it!

there was something else at the end of the dungeon too, a book called *The Black Star: An Achievement of Magic over Daedra*. it has that same symbol that was on the altar in wolfskull cave on it, and it talks about this guy, malyn varen, trying to conquer death and live forever. i am sensing a theme in our bad guys here. i mean, it’s not like anyone wants to die, but a lot of it seems to come back to this immortality and time magic and stuff.

i don’t know, it’s all really weird. i didn’t really understand much of the duration stuff, not the way aradia does. i kind of wish she was still here. i feel like she could help us figure stuff out, at least a little bit. but karkat didn't like to sit on my lap when she was around. so, you know, pros and cons.

You and Karkat keep mostly to yourselves the next day as you walk together. Shadowmere makes the most noise, and that’s just an occasional grunt when your bags start sliding. You’re too wrapped up in your own thoughts and trying to piece together all the stuff you’ve learned in the last week to pay any attention to Karkat, or even really where you’re going. For now you’re just walking along the lake’s shore.

In the afternoon, though, Karkat perks up.

“Hey, John!” he says, pointing across the water.

You have to squint a little to see it, but then you can just make up three stones standing in the distance.

Well shit, you’re almost back to Riverwood. What was it you were supposed to do there again?

Oh yeah! Find the horn for the greybeards!

Getting your mind off of big existential stuff and putting it back on an actual quest you can do really puts a spring back in your step. This day just got a lot better.
Even if you do feel like a fucking idiot because once you get there you're supposed to ask for the attic room in a one-story inn. However, the innkeeper seems oddly undisturbed by it, simply telling you to take the first one on the left. Weird. But you don’t think much of it, because it’s kind of late so you just wanna climb into bed.

Akatosh knows you did not fucking miss these tiny-ass beds. You and Karkat actually decide to get separate rooms for once. It’s not like you’re lacking the gold and no one else seems to be here right now.

It takes a while to get comfortable without another body next to you, but eventually you fall asleep. Then the next thing you know your door creeks open. The sound is just enough to wake you. You smile and don’t open your eyes, assuming that Karkat just got lonely, but then you hear a woman’s voice.

“So, you’re the dragonborn, huh?”

You sit bolt-upright. There stands the innkeeper, arms crossed and face stony.

"Uh, I think so? I mean, that’s what people have been calling me."

“I know. People including the Greybeards. That’s why I took the horn. I knew they would send you there to get it if you truly were dragonborn. Otherwise you could be a Thalmor spy.”

“Okay?” you say.

“I will explain myself somewhere a bit more… private. Anyone could be just outside. Follow me.”

“Can’t I put on pants first?!”

“Ugh, if you must. Then meet me in the room across the way.”

She leaves, closing the door behind her.

As you struggle to find your clothes, you think that that was probably one of the rudest awakenings you’ve had in a while.

A few moments later you’re out, dressed, and ready to meet Delphine. She takes you into the room on the right and throws open the wardrobe.

“Shut the door behind you,” she says over her shoulder before stepping forward.

You step a little deeper into the room, pulling the door closed with a soft click. From a little further forward you’re able to see a set of stairs descending from within the wardrobe. Clothes have been shoved to the side and a false back leans against the side of the fixture.

It’s impossible to see much of the hidden room from your angle, but you’re able to make out a few weapons. Let’s see, secret basement, things that can inflict bodily harm… You prepare a ward in one hand and a spell to summon a flame atronach in the other.

Delphine stands bent over a map on the wooden table.

“The Greybeards seem to think you’re the Dragonborn,” She says. “I hope they’re right. So are they?”

You shrug. “I mean, when I heard the myths it seems like I can do what they say.”
“So you can indeed devour the souls of dragons?”

"I think? I mean, I know I after I kill them there’s some sort of white glowy thing going into me and then I feel this rush of power but I don’t really know if it’s a soul or something else."

"This is not the time to be reluctant,” she snaps. “Are you dragonborn or are you not?”

“Okay, fine. Yeah, I am.”

She stares at you evenly. “If you mean to convince Skyrim, boy, I suggest starting with convincing yourself. But.” She sighs and stands. “I suppose we’ll see if you are dragonborn or not soon enough."

"Why’s that?"

"Because if the legends are true you’ll be able to kill the dragons permanently. Which seems to be kind of a problem at the moment."


"Not quite. There’s no depraved mage standing in the background and pulling the strings. The dragons that were slain eons ago by normal humans are now coming back to life. I’ve visited several dragon burial sites and found them empty."

“Oh."

"You can probably see why that’s serious cause for concern."

"Well what can we do?” You ask. “Normally the dragons find me."

"Yes, but you’ve already done quite a bit.” She gestures to her map. “That dragonstone you found has been invaluable for calculating where the burial sites are and in which order the dragons are being raised."

"Wait, didn’t I give the to Jarl Balgruuf’s court wizard?"

"Indeed you did. But I was able to obtain a copy of it. For a modest fee, of course. I suggest not leaving more of your secrets in the hands of wizards. They’re all desperate for funding these days."

"So if that has where the dragons are gonna show up, can I have that map?” You ask.

“No."

"Why not?"

She sighs. "Because of your friend."

“Who?” You ask. “Karkat?"

"Indeed."

"That’s stupid! Karkat’s great."

"Perhaps you say it that way, but an elf is an elf."

"Huh?"
"I haven’t survived these past thirty years without being careful. I have no choice to trust you because you’re most likely the dragonborn. But you’re the only exception I’m willing to make. I remember the last time you were here. When you were talking to this Karkat he showed great contempt for both the Empire and Stormcloaks, and today I heard him lauding the merits of elves above men."

"When was-? Oh, right, dinner. But that was just because I was making fun of him for being shorter than me! We needle each other all the time. He doesn't actually mean any of the awful shit he says."

"Are you absolutely certain you can trust him?"

"Of course!"

"So in all this time he hasn’t lied to you, hasn’t mislead you in the slightest? He has secrets and a dirty past, I can tell by how he carries himself."

Yeah, you're not about to give her the satisfaction of admitting to any of that. So instead you just say, "You’re crazy! Karkat is awesome and you’re just being paranoid!"

"Historically I have always been rightly paranoid. The Thalmor are as persistent as they are insidious."

"Ugh, I’m out of here. You turn around and storm out."

"Wait, John."

"Why should I?"

"Come to Kynesgrove when Masser is next full and you’ll most likely be able to see the truth of what I’ve said. Do not mention this conversation to Karkat. At least show me that courtesy. If you tell him, I’ll know."

"Whatever," you growl.

On your way out you choose not to close the door behind you.

You decide to stop at Karkat’s room first before heading back to your own, just to check, just to look at him.

And there he is, loosely curled in his bed. For a moment you just stand there and watch him. His blanket’s fallen to his waist, letting you clearly see every change in the way the moonlight reflects off of his skin with each inhale and exhale. He always looks so ethereal under pale light, like some sort of spirit that's managed to become semi-solid. Dunmer are generally kind of creepy-looking, purposefully if you believe the stuff about them being cursed, but they own it. Karkat tries harder than anyone else to live up to that image. He huffs and he shows off his red eyes and tough build while pretending to be ruthless. And maybe he is to his enemies, but not to you. You see his loyalty, his huge heart, and his determination to prove himself. Some of your old books described Dunmer as blood on steel, but when you look at Karkat all you can imagine is rubies encrusted in silver.

No, that’s not quite true. When you run your fingers across his cheek he's warm and soft. You kiss his forehead and leave him safe and sound in his bed. He's not a statue, not some archetypical caricature. He's a person, and one you know and love and trust.

And Delphine? Delphine can go fuck herself.
John normally greets you in the morning with a cheerful “hello!” or “hi there!” or “good morning!” but today it’s just, “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Huh?” you ask, rubbing sleep from your eyes.

“I just… I wanna get back to Whiterun.”

“What’s in Whiterun?”

“A less pushy innkeeper, for one thing,” He grumbles.

“John? Are you okay?”

He puts on a smile, “Yeah. Let’s just have some breakfast and get moving.”

But when you actually get to the table he barely eats. He picks at his porridge and keeps giving you these weird looks. It’s almost like… pity maybe? But it’s not at all condescending. Maybe it’s an “I’m worried about you?” “I have something I need to tell you?” “I’m imagining everything that could possibly go wrong no matter how unlikely like a giant-licking idiot?” And you thought you were supposed to be the worrywart while he just gallivanted about.

The second you finish he drags you out of the inn, throws Shadowmere’s saddle back on, and then the two of you are off across the tundra. You make it to Whiterun just a little afternoon, and then he leaves you at the Bannered Mare because he had something to go get. Does he even know anyone in this town? You didn’t even get the chance to introduce him to Nepeta and Equius the last time you were here.

You’re pondering what the hell he could possibly be up to over a mug of ale when he strides back through the door. He’s grinning from ear to ear, which means without a doubt that something’s about to go wrong.

“Come with me and close your eyes!” He says excitedly.

Yeah, the odds of this ending poorly just went up by about five hundred percent. But after rolling your eyes you dutifully shut them.

That’s still not good enough for John. Once you get out into the street he puts his hands over your eyes, guiding you from behind.

“Is this really necessary?” You ask.

“You’ll peek!”

“I will not!”

But in spite of your protests John keeps leading you forward. People must be staring. You’d be able to check if somebody didn’t have his hands over your eyes. And they’re sweating, his palms moist and hot on your eyelids. Great. What does he have to be nervous about? He’s not being led through the streets by someone who is incredibly easily distracted.

Then after what feels like an eternity he stops. You hear the key click in a lock and then he whispers “watch your step” in your ear. You still nearly trip over the threshold. He steps in behind you and closes the door with a soft click.

The hand in front of your face moves away and John laces his fingers with your own.
“Okay,” he says. You can hear floorboards squeak as he shifts his weight from foot to foot. “Open your eyes.”

The house is small but cozy. A fire is roaring ahead of you, a nice change from the slight Frostfall chill outside. There’s a rack of drying herbs over the hearth, and behind that are a set of stairs and a large table.

"Welcome home," he says.

"Huh? Wait, John, you didn’t!"

"I did! I mean, we’re gonna be staying here a while and we’ll need to winter somewhere, and Lydia’s just been at her parents’ house this whole time, so I thought maybe we could take some of that gold we saved up and use it for something. I know it's not much, but…"

But it’s yours. You have a house. Your breath catches and you shake slightly. The floodgates are about to open, you can feel it. Then John has the nerve to but his hand reassuringly on your back.

“Come on, take off your shoes and I’ll show you around!”

“Okay.” Fuck, your voice is shaky, and so are your hands as you fumble over your boot laces before giving up and just tugging them off.

The floor is warm beneath your stockings, and that does it. John smiles and you try to return the expression through your tears. You think he can tell they’re happy ones, because then he excitedly takes your hand and drags you forward.

Your kitchen is already fully stocked with meat and herbs and vegetables, but then he points your attention to the left.

“I got you an alchemy table! I know you’re always annoyed by how hard it can be to find a good one!”

You step over to the shelves and run your hands along the smooth, freshly-carved wood. There are ingredients here too, some freshly picked, some dried, and a few rarer ones preserved in jars. You’re so taken aback you forget to cry for a moment.

“I mean, they gave me the option of an armory, but I wanted something especially for you, so I-”

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by your violent sobbing. He holds you softly in his arms and kisses your forehead.

“Come on. There’s more.”

“I don’t know if I can handle more,” you croak.

“Haha, come on!” He takes your hand again and leads you up the stairs.

“We’ve got two bedrooms. Lydia has the one over on the left. It’s a little smaller, but she doesn’t have too much stuff so it’s perfect for her. And then we’ve got a couple of chairs up here for just chilling. Then over here…” He throws open the doors with an absurd gesture. “Is the master bedroom!”

It’s sparse. There’s nothing too special about it. The mattress is straw and the blankets are similar to those you take with you for extra cold nights. But it’s yours. It’s real and it’s yours and it’s big
enough for both of you.

“So, what do you think?” He’s smiling and standing with a confident stance, but you can see the desperation in his eyes. He wants you to like it.

And by every fucking god in every fucking religion you do. You grab him by the collar and kiss him before shoving him down onto your new straw bed.

john: i know enough, i think. i’ve read the book and stuff. it’s just a question of how much of it is true. if all of it i kind of have a big job to do…

KARKAT: OF COURSE I AM. I FUCKING LOVE HIM. AND IF HE FAILS IT IS LITERALLY THE END OF THE WORLD.

KARKAT: BUT IF ANYONE CAN DO IT, IT’S PROBABLY HIM.
You wake up to pale morning light pricking at your eyes. It takes a moment to remember where you are, and when you do it’s with a sudden flash flood of emotion. This is no bed at an inn after a long day’s travel. This is your bed. This is your bed in your house.

And John is in it.

Yeah. This is happy. You reach out and stroke fingers through the horrible nest of his hair.


You flick his nose, sit up to rub both hands across your face. “Hrmf,” you grunt.

John snickers, scratchy and muzzy with sleep. “Charming. So how did you sleep the first night in your own home?”

Home.

“Honestly? Kinda shitty,” and then you click your jaw shut because, yeah, way to fucking kick him in the teeth after all he did for you. Good job Karkat, let’s have a round of applause for being an ungrateful bag of dicks.

John just flashes you a wry grin as he swings his legs over the edge and reaches for his breeches. “Me too, I think we got used to sleeping on the hard ground and crappy pallets.”

For breakfast there’s cheese and bread, as well as a few wrinkled apples. Awesome. Less awesome is the return of Lydia.

“My Thane,” she says, bobbing her head at John. “Your return gladdens me. Is there anything you require of me today?”

“Oh,” John goes with his mouth full, eloquent as fuck first thing in the morning. “No?” he hazards.

You roll your eyes.

“As you wish, my Thane,” Lydia says.

“Just John please.”
“As you wish my— John.”

“My John?” you bark, rounding on him as soon as she’s gone.

John pushes his face into yours, waggles his brow. “Are you jealous?”

“No! Just don’t want your head to swell any fatter than it already is! And stop waggling those hairy worms you dare call eyebrows before I rip them off!”

“Alright, alright,” John laughs. “So what do you want to do today?”

“I want to check out Jorrvaskr this time. Seeing as someone was too fucking drunk off his idiot lightweight ass last time we were here.”

Before heading out the door you both buckle into your armor. After all, Jorrvaskr is the headquarters of the Companions. Never hurts to be prepared.

Turns out that Jorrvaskr is this huge upside-down longship. How did you even miss that last time you were in Whiterun?

You stand gaping at it for a few moments, before realizing Karkat has already gone on ahead. Inside it is really dark and the flickering roar of the fire pit in the middle of the main hall blinds and disorients you for a moment. Nice and warm though, after the cold outside. You can feel your nose begin to thaw, and you snuffle.

Even though everybody’s features are warped by a harsh mask of firelight and shadows it’s easy for you to identify Karkat’s slight, eternally wary figure. He’s talking to someone supping at the huge table. Upon joining him, his companion glances up at you. It’s their eyes you see first—before anything and everything else. A lambent green that makes the nape of your neck prickle, the way you sometimes get walking into a treasure room with a priceless item ever-so-conveniently offered on a pedestal in the middle of it. You know, those five seconds right before you’re about to be attacked by an over-powered dungeon dwelling freak that farts fucking fireballs for a living. Beware. They’re set into a pretty heart shaped face with short, wavy hair and smiling mouth.

Karkat’s narrowed eyes flick between the both of you, like glowing chips of coal. “John, meet Nepeta,” he says, flapping a hand between you. “Nepeta, this lumbering catastrophe is John.”

Seriously. It’s like he knows every single damn dunmer the both of you run into. You need to keep a tally or something.

“Hey there,” you waggle fingers at her. “Nice hangout you got here.”

Karkat rolls his eyes.

“Thank you!” Nepeta purrs. “Karkitty was just telling me you bought him a house. That’s so romantic!”

Hehe, Karkitty. You gotta remember that one.

“Nepeta,” Karkat hisses, looking embarrassed.

She giggles. “Whatefur, mister grumpy pants. Anyway, I was just about to head out with Skjor to deal with some bandits, but he’s pawfully late. Purhhaps you’d like to hunt with mew instead? Your feet need to be quick and your eyes quicker,” she rolls her shoulders like a cat about to pounce,
eyes bright and challenging.

“Swift as the wind. It’s me,” you say and Karkat kicks your ankle.

“We’ll split the gold,” she adds.


“We’re in,” Karkat says.

Nepeta grins. It is one hundred percent predatory.

Before heading off to kick some lawbreaking derrière, however, Nepeta tows both your sorry carcasses along to see Equius. You try to tell her that really, you’re perfectly okay with not seeing that sweating pile of dragon dung for another era or five, but she doesn’t seem to be dissuaded in the slightest.

John’s mouth hangs open the entire hike up the stone steps, and he trips more than once. Skyrim, meet your Dovahkiin saviour. No, don’t worry. You’re only doomed a little bit.

Equius is pretty much how you remember him: musclebound and sweaty.

Also huge.

Sparks fly as he hammers with steady, precise blows to fold the red-hot metal in on itself over and over again. When Nepeta pounces on him, she all but dangles from his arm like flotsam. Equius hardly blinks.

“If you please, Nepeta, I am rather busy,” he says in a smooth baritone.

She squishes his cheek with her palm. “Don’t be impurrlite!” she scolds. “I brought friends!”

Equius sighs, utterly put-upon, and shoves the length of metal into a vat filled with water. It spits and boils in response.

“Vantas,” he says, wiping his hands on one of the many towels littering the area.

“Zahhak,” you return.

“John!” John adds.

You’re sorely tempted to toss his ass down the mountain. Nepeta just grins at him. If they buddy up you’re going to tenderly grease up both sickles and gently slide them up two of your most prominent orifices.

“So. Whatcha doin’?” John asks, peering into the forge and blinking rapidly against the heat as his eyes water.

“Is your vision failing you, boy? I’m a blacksmith. Any fool can see that.”

“Du’h,” John clicks his tongue. “I was asking about what you’re making there.”

“An axe.”

“Okay,” John nods a little. “Is it a special axe?”
“It shall be when it is done, having been forged here, in the Skyforge.”

“So it’s enchanted.”

“…well. No, it is not.”

“Then what makes it so super special?” John wants to know.

“Once the local elves believed the forge was a relic of the gods,” Equius informs him indignantly.

“…okay,” John says, arching a brow.

A muscle jumps in Equius’ neck. Seriously. John’s ass. Down the mountain. It’s an awful waste because it is an absolutely glorious ass, but sacrifices must be made for the greater good. Such as your sanity.

“Obviously it is a really good weapon, John, now please shush so we can get a fucking move on already?” you hook a finger around the plating at his nape and tow him towards your side again.

“Heel,” you say, and John lolls his tongue in response. Your boyfriend, ladies and gentlemen.

Equius hands Nepeta her claws. Sunlight plays over the sharp talons. You’re almost sorry for the bandits.

As far as petty crime goes, these assholes aren’t complete amateurs. They’re organized and well equipped. Not to mention they outnumber you nearly three to one.

John charges ahead, Vrillyhoo raised high above his head. It’s impossible to take him seriously when swings that multicolored monstrosity around and clearly the bandits don’t either. Idiots.

One mighty swing, and the bandit’s skull bursts apart like an overripe melon despite the Scaled Helmet that’s supposed to prevent just that. They approach him much, much more warily after that. You grin at your own opponent, twirl your right sickle around your wrist in a dangerous, flashy arc and disembowel the absolute fucker with the left while he’s distracted.

All that is nothing, nothing at all, compared to how Nepeta fights. The ferocious joy on her face as she leaps into the air with her claws aimed for an orc’s unprotected back sends a shivery thrill down your spine. They tear through the big brute’s hide like he’s made from butter. Nepeta rides him down towards the ground with her weight, licks the blood off her face as she withdraws her claws with a wet sucking noise from the corpse.

Note to self: do not piss off Nepeta. Ever. Merciless Boethiah and she’s only playing around right now.

One by one the bandits fall under the blow of your weapons. And then, just like that, it goes wrong. Completely and devastatingly wrong.

John screams and you whip your head around fast enough to see him bodily hit the dirt after being blasted at point-blank range with an ice spike. He’s on his back with a hand gripping the shard jutting out of the tender flash at his side, restoration magic pulsing from his fingers -he’s fine, he’s alive, but the thug is advancing on him with an axe as wide as your arm while he’s down and vulnerable and you’re going fucking to destroy that piece of shit because that’s your boyfriend.

You’re already moving, already running. But not as swift as Nepeta. It happens so fast. Darkness curling from her skin, a blood curling snarl.
A spray of blood.

John going: “Holy fucking Arkay…” into the resulting hush.

There’s a body on the ground. Sitting on the body, muzzle slick with blood and viscera, is a sabre cat. You didn’t even notice the damn thing was there, didn’t see it coming and it’s right next to John -is getting up and padding over to him and you’re raising both sickles when John yells: “DON’T!”

“Don’t kill the highly dangerous predator with sharp pointy fangs?” you snarl at him, but you’re not attacking. Yet. “Other brilliant strategies to offer?” and oh gods oh fuck oh no, no, no it’s lowering its huge head and… purring.

It is purring at John. Also licking his face clean.

What?

“I think it’s Nepeta!” John says, rather pitched and strangled.

“What?” you manage out loud this time.

*Purr* purrrrrrrrrr goes the giant killing machine, caging John between four massive paws as it looms over him.

“One bark for yes, two for no,” John instructs the sabre cat. It promptly stops purring, bares teeth at him instead. “Uh, one cat noise of choice for yes, two for no. Sorry.”

There’s a deafening rowr! in response, loud enough to rattle your teeth in your skull. John makes a spluttering noise as the cat… uh, Nepeta, continues to groom him. Licking his face. Nepeta is licking John. Your John. Best if you don’t think too hard about it, fuck.

You’ve heard about this. In obscure corners of taverns and dusty pages of books so old and damaged the paper crumbled between your fingers as you attempted to turn the page. You honestly believed it was a myth. A legend. Wow, you’ve just been proved really fucking wrong, huh?

Like this she’s huge, bigger than any sabre cats you’ve seen ever during all of your travels. Gorgeous brindled fur that gleams golden and bronze in the light of day. The shape of her, you see now, is slightly distorted, no, —*altered* with an echo of a vaguely humanoid built elongating the front limbs, gentling around the more powerful curve of her hind ones. Slighter around the waist, wider in the shoulder and with a more defined neck.

Holy shit. How is this your life again? Dragons. Daedric Princes. Old friends that turn into giant cats. Seriously. You’re just going to blame John for it. All of it.

It’s hard to keep your hands to yourself as soon as Nepeta lets John to his feet -and you don’t manage, either, frantic hands patting at his body before pulling him down for a brief bruising kiss, one that leaves him grinning dazedly. Nepeta purrs louder, making eyes squinted with pleasure.

On your way back to Whiterun John skips about poking at flowers. Leaves them regretfully behind when you give him the stink eye. You can’t with this guy. You really can’t. Battle mode one moment, oooh flowers the next, all instances of near death and werecreatures all but forgotten.

Nepeta transforms back just as city looms into view at the horizon, wearing clothes and all. Wow, handy. She shrugs at your awed stares, a little sheepish, a little worried, bright eyes veering down. Just through the gates she stops you, handing you an equal share of the fee and the loot. “Thank
“you,” she says, earnestly. “Fur not freaking out.”

“Oh, I’m freaking out alright,” you say. “I mean, you transformed into a huge cat and munched on someone’s face. But you’re still my friend.”

The smile she offers you is sweet, and an awful lot fond. “There’s a bard coming up to Jorrvaskr tonight,” she tells you. “Why don’t you both come? There’ll be ale and fresh meat.”

John utterly fails at hiding the look of utter excitement on his face. The sparkle in his eyes is all ‘oh, can we pretty please, Karkat, can we can we?’.

“Yeah, sure,” you agree. “We’ll be there.”

“Purrfect!” she rocks back on her heels, bounces a little. “See you later, boys.”

And she’s off.

“Okay,” John says. “That was different.”

“Yeah, no fucking kidding,” you agree.

The two of your share a wry look. Your eyes wander of his blood-and-saliva streaked face, the dusty wildness of his hair, the open blue of his irises.

“Let’s just get cleaned up,” you say, and tangle your dirty fingers with his.

John all dirty and sweaty without a shirt is going to be the death of you. Especially if he stands around pouting like that while he tries to scrub the dirt off. It’s difficult to keep your hands to yourself and you deserve all the damn treasure in all of Tamriel for not going over there and—fuck (fuck sounds about right though, damn it all). So you turn your worthless ass around and march it away, before you lose control and molest the hell out of him.

…and maybe you’re imagining it, but there’s a flash of emotion on John’s face and -for just a moment- you think it might be disappointment. Must be blue balls messing with your head. You will go slow for John, you fucking will. Even if all you want to do is throw yourself at him.

Dusk has fallen by the time the both of you head up to Jorrvaskr. Despite the cold, the city comes alive around you both in swaths of golden firelight spilling through the windows of homes. Other citizens hurry through the streets as they look for a way to unwind after a hard day of work. Strains of music spill out of taverns and into the night.

It’s quite a hike through the city and the air is brisk this late in Frostfall. Your teeth are chattering by the time you both stumble inside. The flash of heat promptly numbs your cheeks. The place is packed with people and you’d never have spotted Nepeta if Equius wasn’t such a sweaty pillar of disapproval standing a head-and-shoulders taller than anybody else.

The food is great, you’re ravenous and it’s nice to talk to old friends and have John by your side making happy noises as he stuffs his face. You don’t drink, there’s too many strangers and all of them are armed to the teeth, but the bard is pretty good and before long the heat and energy go to your head anyway.

You dance with Nepeta, and you even get thrown into the arms of people you’ve never seen before, but you keep looking for John during it all anyway. When you finally find him, he’s talking to some hooded horker with a serious asshat complex. As well as accepting a mystery mug from said steaming pile of horker shit.
“What the blistering fuck are you doing?” you demand loudly, pushing your way over to them.

“Hi Karkat!” John says, happily bumping shoulders with you. “I’m trying to win a staff!”

You spread out your arms to an imaginary audience: “Today on John is a complete idiot: yes, let’s drink the mystery brew you received from a total stranger, it’ll be fun and nothing will go wrong ever.” You snatch the mug out of his hands and upturn it.

“Aw,” John goes, looking at the puddle of liquid on the floor.

“Hey!” the man goes, indignant.

You flip a coin at him. “Here, now get lost before I decide your entrails would make lovely garters,” you snarl, and to John you add: “I can’t believe how utterly useless you are, mister Thane of Whiterun and Dragonborn extraordinaire I didn’t know it was a stupid dumb idea to drink or eat shit given to me by strangers.”

“What did I do?” John asks, blinking down at you and damn if he doesn’t look amazing with his flushed face and dark hair and holy fuck you want to climb this doofus like a tree and rattle his branches.

“Everything,” you snap and grab him by the front of his tunic. “Dance with me.”

Neither of you are good at dancing, but everybody is drunk and there’s so many people pressing around close being hot and alive it doesn’t matter. One of the dances is the kind that passes you around from partner to partner, a whirl of breathless movement that gets in your head and under your skin like fire. At the end of the ditty you find yourself hurled into John’s waiting arms again and in the flurry of song and elation you rise to the tips of your toes and sneak a kiss. It’s brief and chaste but heavier than otherwise. You mouths align and you meet in a soft press of shaky exhales.

Against the corner of your mouth John says: “Let’s go back home.”

Your throat goes dry. “Okay.”

The sheets are cool against your skin and Karkat is hot against your front.

There’s this shivering, boiling feeling in your gut that could be pure happiness or tension. Both, maybe, it’s hard to tell. Tonight is different than usual, you can tell by the way Karkat has his palms curled against the sides of your face to kiss you, how he presses into you like he’s hoping to sneak past the boundaries of your body. He’s breathing fast, but deep, exactly the way he does when he fights and goosebumps bloom across your skin in the wake of his harsh exhales.

You slip nervous fingers under his shirt, walk them along the muscles of his back. Karkat’s spine arches like a bow being drawn and his leg pushes between yours. Your hips align and you shudder. Karkat breaks away with a delicate noise, lips dragging down your chin before he pulls back enough to breathe against the front of your throat.

“I can,” he begins, then hesitates. He’s still holding your face. “I can stop. I. It’s just—“

“But,” you say into his hair. “We can do a little, right? Not… not all the, uh. You know. With the- not that.”

On his way up again his lips glance across the corner of your mouth. His face is all twisted up in that familiar way that tells you he’s a completely exasperated with your waffling. “Define ‘a
little’,” he growls, red eyes searching yours under brows set into serious business-mode.

“More?” you suggest uselessly. You’ve never done this with anybody, but this you know: more. More from him.

“More,” he echoes roughly. “Do my hands down your trousers qualify as more, John? Can I manually operate your dick? Is that a thing that can happen, cause you got to help me out here.”

“That’s fine!” you hurry to assure him. “Can I, uh, manually operate you back?”

It’s hard to tell in the dark, but you can feel his face go hot. “Sure,” he grunts, and his nostrils flare in a manner that means he’s trying really hard to be cool about it (and totally failing, hehe).

You kiss his nose, and then his mouth. He kisses you back.

There’s an achy feeling in your chest, and your throat feels thick. You’re nervous about this, but hungry most of all, hungry from groin-to-lips and inside out. It’s with frantic hands that you try to pull his shirt over his head, but Karkat is sucking on your tongue, languid and wet. He does it gently, working his own tongue against yours as he ever so slightly draws back before pushing in again. His thumbs swipe along your cheeks.

“Clothes,” you say, as soon as he pulls away. The whole of your mouth is suffused with the taste of him, something that reminds you of the aftermath of a battle, but still uniquely him.

“Yeah,” he agrees, openmouthed against you lower lip.

It should be cold, but you’re not feeling it at all. It’s Frostfall after all. When Karkat curls forward and peels off his tunic he gleams damply. Starlight makes his gray skin look like quicksilver. His build is slighter than yours, all lithe agility, but he’s just as much of a warrior as you are and muscle clenches and releases visibly under his skin.

Are you staring? You’re staring, whoops, hehe. So distracted you haven’t even moved to take off your own clothes. Karkat’s mouth kicks up at the corner as he reaches out to help you. You still got one arm caught in the fabric of your shirt when he’s back at your mouth again, licking past the threshold of your lips and into the heat of your mouth even as he slides a hand over the hard ridge of your cock straining your trousers. Your stomach hollows and your mouth falls open. Karkat slings a leg over your waist so he can straddle you.

He’s naked. When did he— how did— huh? You’d call magic if he wasn’t such a Nord about it. Then again, naked Karkat in your lap. You lick your lips. Yes good, proceed.

More kissing. Karkat’s flat on top of you. He has a hand in your hair and his mouth is branding across that high curving spot just at the hinge of your jaw. You have greedy handfuls of his ass, one hand for each buttock. Through the coarse layer of fabric your cocks slide together.

“Ah, fuck,” Karkat snarls, and holy shit if that isn’t the most beautiful sound you’ve ever heard. You knead your fingers into the plush flesh of his rump, and roll your body up into his for an encore of that. Karkat obliges beautifully: “Fuck, fuck, John, don’t stop-“

“My pants,” you say hoarsely. “Can you—“

Karkat hovers over your upper thighs to pick at the lacing of your trousers. Doesn’t bother to properly get them off you even, nope, just hastily shoves them halfway down your upper legs before crawling up your body, the lazyass.
Even in the low light you can tell the tip of his dick is wet. You swallow as he lowers himself onto you with agonizing care. You twine together, hands going everywhere. The sheets slide off the bed, forgotten, as Karkat works his dick against yours with short, experimental jerks.

“Oh wow, shit,” you gasp into his mouth.

Karkat licks a stripe along the seam of your mouth, bares his teeth victoriously. “Yeah?”


It’s good like that; him heavy on top of you with his thighs spread apart and body flexing. Good and hot and close. You drag fingers down his back and he pulls at your hair. It’s wet between your bellies, sweat and precome and damp heat from grinding together. Your cock hurts, and your skin seems too large and strange and new, like Karkat’s managed to pour himself through the cracks in your being and is settling there to stay.

Skin under your teeth, fuck, tastes salty, tastes good, so you bite down, hard. Karkat gives a full-body shudder that makes your dick give a needy throb before pushing himself up. Hands press heavy on your chest as Karkat leans on them as he shifts around to align himself with you. He’s bowed over you, body tense, hair hanging in his face. Despite yourself, your hips jerk towards him.

“Karkat?”

He jumps a little, a reflexive tightening of surprise that pinches the heat at the apex of his legs on your groin in the most delicious way.

“Yeah,” he breathes and lifts one hand away to pin both your dicks flush against your belly, making a tight hot space for you to slide through side-by-side.

You cup your hand over the one he’s using to brace on your chest. Karkat tangles your fingers and begins to move his hips. On that first thrust you choke on a white-hot bolt of pleasure and you nearly come then and there. Everything goes dangerously taut and hot, and you can hear yourself groan loudly. Not quite yet, though, not really, but you fucking shiver every single time the flare of his cock grinds along yours.

Between you both, Karkat’s pendant sways rhythmically, winking in the moonlight.

You can’t help but think about the Chaurus, and how awkward it would be if you accidentally managed to summon the thing by having sex. You laugh, helplessly.

“What’s so funny now, you ridiculous sack of stupidity,” Karkat grits out. Doesn’t seem to expect an answer, nor want one, because he swipes the pad of his thumb against the tip of your dick to shut you up. But he does the same along your knuckles, tenderly, and you smile.

Red eyes are locked with yours, and they’re too wild, too strange like this, too precious and you can’t look away. Karkat’s lips are slack and trembling, his eyes are lidded. He’s wonderfully noisy, all: “Ah, aaah, fuck, John oh fuck, please-” the more he gives himself over to it. It’s shameless and dirty and lovely, it makes your heart thunder in your ears for this person.

Karkat consumes you like a fever, and you burn.

Your world explodes as the first wave of your orgasm pulses through you. Everything goes taut and you arch violently enough to lift Karkat up along with you as you shake apart under him. A hand smooths across your chest, grazes along your nipples. You whine, overstimulated, and reach for him with both arms.
It ends in a sloppy tangle on your sides, with one leg finally kicked free from your trousers and tucked snug between Karkat’s for him to rock himself to completion against. You wrap yourself around him, stroking dazed hands along the sweat-slick line of his back. Karkat’s own are claws digging into your skin as he fucks himself against you. You hold him close, kiss the side of his face and whisper that you love him against the curve of his ear.

He goes rigid, head falling back in the cradle of your hand and his cry rings through the room. You watch him leap over the edge right after you.

(he would. he would)

There’s thick, sloppy wetness between your stomachs and streaks of it all the way up to your chest (eeeew). Karkat is a shaking wreck against your front, breathing hard. You nuzzle against his cheek and tremble right back with released tension. Your head is heavy, and your hands caress clumsily along the line of his body.

It takes a while to get your bearings. To you, this feels bigger, more important than when that very first dragon soul settled into your chest with cruel, bright light. How can you still be just here, in this room, unchanged, when you feel like this? You don’t understand.

Both your bodies steam faintly against the cold air, and Karkat shivers. You roll over and grope after the sheets. When you scramble back up Karkat is laid out against the bed, watching you with one arm crooked behind his head.

And after all this time, after everything that just happened, that’s what makes you shy. “What?” you ask, throwing the armful sheets into his face.

Karkat… Karkat smiles. It barely curves his mouth, really, but it’s right there in his eyes. Wordless, he takes the sheets and doesn’t even bother to properly spread them. Just pulls you down in the middle of them and shifts around until you’re tucked into a nest of it. Hands play through your hair with this nearly worshipful gentleness, and you hide your face against the warm safeness of his throat.

You know you said the house would be Karkat’s, that you’d leave if that’s what he wanted because he deserves this, really deserves it, and it was something within your power to give to him.

But… you don’t ever want to have to leave.
Chapter 10

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

Chapter Notes

this is a very short chapter, but because this was a major division when I originally posted it, and the end of the "first act," as it were, I'm doing this here.

There should be about 20 pages next week!

You’re warm.
You’re safe.

The sun threatens to peek over the horizon. You can see bits of pinkish light peeking through the shutters. John is curled behind you sleeping soundly, his warm, soft body pressed against yours. Your entire body is made of lead, but you’re going to move.

Really, you are.
For him you will.

You turn your back on the east, wrap your arms around your boyfriend, your lover now, and close your eyes again.

You’re warm.
You’re safe.

Fuck it all, you're home.

John cranes his neck up to bury his nose in your hair. You tuck your face against the crook of his neck. You love his scent, earthy and familiar. When did human smell get to be so comfortable? You always used to think it was too harsh, too musky.

But then John wormed his way into your life and into your heart and made a comfy little nest in there.

Fuck you if you don't love it.

John's murmuring something. His voice is soft and thick with sleep, like he didn't slur enough fully conscious. But the vibrations in his neck and chest are nice, so whatever. He places one hand on your back and lightly traces your spine.

Yes this, this is good. You want to stay like this for the rest of your life.

That is, until you get hungry. Then you and John drag yourselves down for breakfast.

Lydia brings you food, but she refuses to meet your eyes. Well fuck her. You never liked her anyway and you got laid and it was awesome. If she ever did have any intentions towards John,
you’re pretty sure those have been pretty thoroughly squashed. And it turns out she makes pretty good sweetrolls.

After a while she politely excuses herself to visit the market stalls to get something for supper, leaving you and John alone.

“So what next?” You ask.

“Well…” John reaches into his bag and pulls out an old twisted horn.

“What?! Is that the- how the fuck did you get that?”

“The innkeeper in Riverwood is part of this ancient illegal order or something. She seems full of shit but she gave me this. I’m taking it back to the Greybeards.”

“What do you mean, ’I’m taking it back’?” You ask softly.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it? You wanted somewhere to call home, and you’ve totally earned it.” He beams brightly. “I have more shit I have to do, but that’s no reason to keep you from this.”

“So last night…” Your mouth is so dry that it’s hard to find words. Or maybe your tongue’s just as paralyzed as the rest of you. (You really need to loosen your fists. Your palms are going to start bleeding if your nails keep digging in like that.) “Last night was goodbye, wasn’t it?”

“Kind of? More like a see you later! I’ll come back and visit you, I promise!”

“Right.” You say, looking down at your plate. You knew this was too good to be true. And you knew this would have to happen eventually, but you’d hoped it wouldn’t be so soon. You should have known better.

He puts the horn back in his pack. “I need to go get some stuff, but then I think I’ll head out. I mean, it’s still early.”

He gets to his feet and stretches then. He pauses for a moment and looks at you. Fuck, he’s asking permission, isn’t he? Waiting to see if you’re going to let him go, as though someone like you could ever force someone like him to stay.

“Okay,” you reply.

“Oh… Alright then! I’ll see you soon!” On the way out he pauses at the door. You think he glances back at you, but it’s probably just your imagination.

And then he leaves you to everything you thought you wanted.

You can’t help but tear into yourself as you walk down the street. Normally you shove this kind of thing down, lock those parts of your psyche away and ignore them, but today you can’t. Today you have no idea what to do. Normally it’s painfully obvious which side you should be listening to, but now…

*Karkt has what he wants.*

*He looked sad, though.*

*That’s just your imagination! Stop being so selfish.*
But this meant something to him too, you know it did.

It doesn’t matter if it hurts you. He’s safe now, he has somewhere he can feel at home.

Is that really what he wants?

Of course it is! He told you so!

You’re so busy arguing with yourself that you walk right into Lydia. She nearly drops her basket but manages to grab it again at the last moment.

“John! Are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah! I’m heading off as soon as I get some supplies.” You smile. “Important Dragonborn stuff to do and things like that.”

“Of course. Does that mean I’ll just be cooking for myself then?”

“No. Karkat’s staying.”

“What?” This time she does drop the basket.

“Come on, I know you don’t always see eye to eye, but he’s a good guy. I’m sure you'll be able to get along!”

“That is not what concerns me. Are you certain you want to head out without him? A good companion is invaluable.”

“I know, but I'm sure this is what he wants.”

“That makes one of us,” she mutters.

“What?”

“Nothing. I shall see you later, then.”

“Right.”

This time you keep your eyes locked right in front of you. You’re not going to think anymore, even if you’re still not completely sure this is right.

You don’t stop back at home. You’re pretty sure your heart wouldn’t be able to take it. You’d turn back or, worse, drag him with you. So instead you head directly for the stables. You greet Shadowmere before getting your armor on as the stable hands get him ready. You can’t help but think that it’ll be nice not to be completely alone.

You check your equipment far more thoroughly than really necessary. You tell yourself that it’s because you’re going to have to be even more careful now. You’re not stalling, why would you be stalling?

Eventually, you reluctantly climb onto Shadowmere. Well, it'll be a little less cramped now. That’s a plus at least.

You give his neck one more pat and urge him forward.

“Wait!”
You turn to look. Karkat stands on the city wall, sun gleaming gold off new elven armor. Before you can get a good look he jumps off and lands on the roof of the stables before sliding down to stand next to you. He’s breathing hard and bends over, leaning against Shadowmere.

“Karkat?”

“Yeah - oh fuck this shit is way heavier than leather - it’s me.” He straightens up, still puffing a little. “You didn’t think I was actually going to let you leave like that, did you?”

You slide back off of the horse. “Karkat, you have a home now, you don’t have to-

“Not without you I don’t!”

You startle.

“You’re my home, fuckhat. It’s not so fucking complicated.”

You open your mouth to say something, but then he grabs you by the neck and forces you into a deep kiss. Your resolve crumbles and you throw your arms around him, kissing back as hard as you can.

He pulls away too quickly for your liking, but then you remember he never quite got his breath back. Although, jeez, you’d think the air he took from you with that kiss would have been enough.

"Besides,” he adds. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. You need me. Skyrim is fucked with a dead dragonborn and if you went out alone that’s exactly what we’d have.”

“You’re right,” you say. “Let’s go.”

You hold out one hand and, smiling, he takes it.

KARKAT: SURPRISingly with my luck, not really. Luckily even if the dragons are coming back they’re not that common.

john: (hehe, he thinks that, but i’ve secretly been putting up wards around our site that make us invisible from the sky)

KARKAT: WHAT WAS THAT?

john: nothing! just talking to myself, babe!
john: oh yeah, all the time. it runs in the family.

john: but i'm used to it. eventually you just sort of realize what's real and what's not and filter the fake stuff out.

KARKAT: THERE'S THOSE WEIRD MEMORIES, THOUGH. I KEEP GETTING THOSE TOO.

john: ever since that first dragon showed up both karkat and i have been having these weird memory flash backs. flash forwards? it’s like we’ll be going along doing our thing but then something horrible happens, usually one of us dying. then all of a sudden we’re a few minutes back in time.

john: i don’t know what it is or what it means, it’s just really…

KARKAT: FOREBODING AND DISQUIETING?

john: yeah, that.
Chapter 11

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

The landscape to the east of Whiterun hasn't changed all that much since the last time you passed through it. Some of the scattered trees have begun to have splashes of gold or crimson amongst their leaves, but fall has yet to truly conquer this far south.

John, sadly, has not forgotten about the magic bullshit and he wants to go get those books. Since you just made a big proclamation about going with him, you don't really have any other choice but to follow him. Fellglow keep isn’t difficult to locate and is even easier to enter through some kind of drainage pipe. You crawl through the dungeon, quickly dispatching any apprentices that manage to notice you.

Honestly, you could probably just take care of these assholes if you ran in with weapons drawn. And it would keep your boots from getting covered in sludge that you really hope is just mud. This is new fucking armor too!

Finally you find your way to a cramped torture chamber. Maybe if you’re lucky, you think, that Orthorn guy will be in one of the cells and can just hand over the stupid books.

There’s no such luck. As soon as you defeat the man guarding the cells, you turn to the bars to see three pairs of blood-red eyes staring back at you. And none of the people with them are Dunmer.

“I’ll get you guys out of there!” John says.

“No wait, that’s not such a-”

He throws a lever on the far end of the room.

The gates swing open, and now there is nothing but your sickles and armor to protect you from three ravenous vampires.

The one in the center, a bulky Orc, smiles.

“It is alright,” he says. “You can lower your weapons.”

“Sure,” you reply. “I’m sure that’s exactly what you want!”

“We mean you heroes no harm,” another vampire, this one a female Bosmer, says. “After all, you’ve saved us.”

“Besides,” the third, a young-looking Breton, chimes in. “We’re not stupid enough to attack people who can do things like that.” She gestures to the bodies of one of her captors, which has been reduced to ash by a properly-placed fireball.

“Yeah, while you’d be the first,” you mutter.

“Perhaps the first that you’ve noticed,” Vampire number two says. “Those of lower covens may, perhaps, be unable to keep from blindly attacking mortals, but those of us who serve The Queen of the North are of a different disposition entirely.”

“The Blood Potions help,” the Breton adds cheerfully.
“The what now?” John asks.

“You’ll learn when the time is right,” the Bosmer says, stepping out of her cell. “Her Majesty knows all about the both of you and when she chooses you will find her.”

The words send a shiver down your spine.

“Now if you’ll excuse us…” she summons balls of fire to her hands. “Those bastards have killed the leaders of our coven. It’s time we give them what they deserve.”

And with that she runs out of this room and into the next, the other vampires following in her wake.

“Well that was… something,” you say.

“Yeah.”

The sounds of explosions and screaming resonate from the next room over. You and John exchange glances and draw your weapons. You have a job to do.

turdas, 23rd frostfall 4e201

…so after that whole vampire thing the rest of the dungeon was pretty easy! orthorn didn’t have the books, so we thought we’d have to fight the leader (some lady who goes by "the caller"), but she just gave them too us. i kind of like the not having to kill people thing, it’s way nicer than the alternative.

she told us we had to leave right away, but it was late so we’ve just set up camp over the next hills. we should probably arrive at ivarstead late tomorrow. man, i’m not looking forward to climbing that mountain. it's got to be even colder now than it was before.

hopefully i've started to adjust a little bit? maybe?

who am i kidding? it's fucking freezing up here.

LOREDAS, 25TH FROSTFALL 4E201

CLIMBED THE THROAT OF THE WORLD. GREYBEARDS WERE ALL LIKE “OOOOOH MIGHTY DRAGONBORN, WE CREAM OUR ROBES FOR YOU.” LIKE GOING THROUGH THAT DUNGEON AND GRABBING THE HORN WAS SUPER DIFFICULT OR SOMETHING. THEY GAVE HIM THIS INITIATION CEREMONY, BUT I HAD TO LEAVE THE ROOM BECAUSE APPARENTLY OTHERWISE THEIR “COMBINED SHOUTS WOULD KILL ME.” I MEAN, IT WASN'T WORTH TESTING, BUT I'M PRETTY SURE THAT'S A LOAD OF BULLSHIT.

ANYWAY, THEIR STUPID MONASTERY IS OPEN TO JOHN FROM NOW ON. NO FUCKING MENTION OF ME.

TYPICAL.

loredas, 28th frostfall 4e201

a true miracle happened today. i didn’t believe it at first, but it really happened! we met a dark elf
karkat did not personally know.

her name was medresi dran. we met her today just inside angarvunde, which are these ruins a day southeast of ivarsted. she had hired these other guys to go through for her so she could get this treasure that was supposed to be there, but apparently they chickened out after seeing a few draugr. so she had us do it. karkat didn’t want to, but i was curious what the treasure actually was and she said she’d share it with us.

it wasn’t too big of a deal, not too bad for a big old dungeon, but she was just too eager when we got to the end. i tried to stop her, but she ran ahead and activated a massive trap and died. just like that. after we kept her safe through all the draugr. the treasure wasn’t even all that great…

we’re staying in her camp tonight. we’ll reach riften tomorrow no problem. and then we have to do that mission vriska gave us. here's hoping it works out well!

Goldenglow estate is bigger than you expected. Like way bigger. What house takes up a whole island? Shit, you’ve seen real working forts with fewer defenses. You did a quick sweep around, and it looks like there's no easy way over the walls.

It’s good they told you about the sewer, even though it does smell like dead skeeever in here. (Not that there isn’t a good reason for that, but the skeevers attacked you first!)

Karkat reaches to put a hand on the ladder, but you stop him.

“What is it?” he hisses.

“Okay, so let’s just go over this again,” you say. "You go into the basement and get whatever is in the safe. Meanwhile I’ll distract all the guards by running out and setting the hives on fire.”

“I know, John. Your plans aren’t that complicated.”

“And remember, whatever happens we’re not killing anyone.”

He rolls his eyes. “I know, I know. Because you’re such a fucking paradigm of morality here.”

“I’m sure if this mission wasn’t important we wouldn’t be doing it!”

“You’re trusting the Serkets, John. That's never a good idea.”

“If you’re so against it, why are you here?”

Instead of answering you, he mutters to himself and begins to climb. When he reaches the top lifts the manhole cover just slightly and peers around. It looks like you’re in luck, because he removes the cover and climbs out, waving for you to follow. The exit leads you inside the walls, just outside the manor itself.

Karkat takes his position, hiding in a bush and you stand upright and start running towards the hives. The mercenaries are charging after you before you’ve made it thirty feet and more keep pouring out from everywhere to get you. How much gold do these guys have that they can pay all of them? Jeez.

The beehives aren’t that far away. You cast three fireballs, each hitting its mark.

Shit, that didn’t take nearly as long as you’d hoped. You want to keep running, but between the armor and the equipment you can only sprint for so long. Shit, why didn’t you head into town first
and leave it somewhere safe?

Instead you shout as hard as you can. The guards go flying and lay there a moment before starting to get to their feet. You try to cast a fear spell, but they don’t react. Instead they slowly advance upon you, weapons drawn.

One of them, a massive Nord grins and shakes his head, making the beads in his hair rattle. His yellow teeth are filed down into spikes and you can’t pull your eyes away.

Maybe the fear spell reflected off of something and went back to you. Your feet feel rooted to the ground. You drop your hammer and it vanishes back into the ether. There are dozens of guards. Even if you did decide to fight you wouldn’t win.

You jump backwards into the lake and start swimming.

You just hope you gave Karkat enough time…

______________________________

middas, 29th frostfall, 4e201

karkat was supposed to be back my now. we finally raided goldenglow estate, figured we’d split up to cover more ground. but my part ran too fast, i think, and now he’s gone, and i’m just worried he’s gone-gone.

i need to go back. i’ve gotta find him.

______________________________

MIDDAS, 29TH FROSTFALL 4E201

SO WE WERE TRYING TO BREAK INTO GOLDENGLOW TODAY (JOHN DIDN’T FORGET THIS ONE EITHER, GODDAMMIT). I WAS EXPECTING GUARDS. I WAS EXPECTING LOCKS. I WAS EVEN KIND OF EXPECTING DOGS.

WHAT I WASN’T EXPECTING WAS AN ENTIRE CAPTOR FAMILY REUNION. I STARTED TO SNEAK THROUGH AND SAW THREE GENERATIONS OF PSIIONICS SITTING IN THE PARLOR.

THANKFULLY, SOLLUX HAD MY BACK. HE MIGHT BE A MAXIMUM DICKWAD, BUT HE’S MY MAXIMUM DICKWAD. HE SAID HE’D INVITED ME SINCE I WAS IN TOWN, AND I ALMOST KISSED THAT HORKERFUCK BECAUSE OTHERWISE I WOULD HAVE TOTALLY BEEN DEAD.

I DON’T HAVE A CHOICE BUT TO HANG OUT FOR A WHILE AND LISTEN TO MOST OF THE OLDER ASSHOLES TALK ABOUT FAMILY POLITICS. APPARENTLY THEY’RE PLANNING ON SELLING THIS ESTATE, BUT CRAZY UNCLE ARINGOTH WON’T SAY TO WHOM. APPARENTLY HE’S JUST SICK OF GETTING EXTORTED, WHICH IS PRETTY MUCH FAIR ENOUGH.

I STILL NEED TO CLEAR OUT THE SAFE, BUT I FEEL LIKE KIND OF AN ASSHOLE ABOUT IT SINCE NOW THEY’RE TREATING ME REALLY NICELY. BUT IF NOT JOHN’S GOING TO GET IN A LOT OF TROUBLE.

WEIRD, THERE’S SOMETHING GOING ON OUTSIDE…

______________________________
This time you left everything at the inn. Instead of armor you’re wearing your robes. Magic is more effective against big groups anyway, and maybe now you’ll be better at sneaking (you’ll definitely be better at escaping). You can always summon your hammer, but other than that you just carry a dozen or so potions and poisons that karkat had left.

You slip in via the sewer again. It’s still unguarded, so they probably didn’t figure out that’s how you guys got in. When you leave the sewer you become invisible and slink across the yard.

But you’re so focused on getting to Karkat you accidentally set off the magical alarm. A loud screech emanates from the ground, the walls, everything. Over the noise, you can hear a few cries of alarm.

You call on your magic and summon a pair of atronachs.

“What the fuck is going on here?” a familiar voice cries out.

“Karkat?”

You lower your arms and so do the mercenaries. He’s just standing there in front of the door, dressed in normal clothes and completely unarmed.

“John?”

“Karkat!” You run towards him and grip him in a big bear hug.

“John! What in Oblivion are you-”

“You’re alive!” You exclaim.

He sputters. “Of course I’m alive!”

“KK? What the hell is going on here?”

“Sollux?” You ask.

“JN?” Sollux asks.

“As much as I fucking love saying names over and over again,” Karkat says, rolling his eyes, “You want to tell me why you’re here?”

“Well when you didn’t meet up with me I got so worried, so I came to rescue you.”

Sollux sighs, “Just come in. Let’s get this shit sorted out.”

You are sick and tired of these assholes dropping in. You’re supposed to be on vacation, dammit, and all you’ve done is wrangle adventurers and babysit Mituna. But, fuck it all, you like Karkat a lot better than your uncle (not that that’s saying much) so after he told you why he was here, you agreed to help him take whatever your uncle has in the basement.

“You don’t have to come with us,” John whispers.

“Yeah, except for the mercenaries all know me but would probably attack you on sight, and you need psiioniics to open the safe.”

“Won’t they know it’s you then?”
“Eh, we’ll just blame Mituna,” you say as you walk down the stairs. “He won’t care as long as I time it to one of his passive moods.”

"Rude."

You can’t help but jump. He was waiting for you, which is weird enough, but his voice… It’s probably a fluke. He hasn’t spoken like that in years.

“Who are you?” John asks.

“Nobody,” Mituna answers. He takes his helmet off and brushes his bangs out of his face. His eyes are clear. Your brother is back. Really back.

“I wanted to meet the dragonborn, see if you’re really all that.”

“And what do you think?” John asks.

“We’re all doomed.”

"Oh, what else is new?” Karkat asks.

Mituna smiles. “Nothing at all.”

”Tuna…” You say softly. He looks at you for a moment and there’s something you can’t quite place in those miss-matched eyes, maybe it’s just the remnants of the genius that got him into this mess in the first place.

And then his eyes gloss over again and he’s gone. He grins. “The fuck’re you out of bed for? Late night three-way? Aradia’s gonna be pissed!”

No…As quickly as it came it's gone. He's gone. So you snap at what's left. “Yes, that is exactly what we are here for. Go back to bed.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Yeah, well you have to.”

“Says who?”

“Says me.”

“Psh, you’re younger. Not fair.”

“By two minutes. And I wasn’t stupid enough to blow out my goddamn brain!”

You don’t notice your powers are acting up until you hear the crackling and start to smell the ozone. You find you don’t really care.

“Sollux, stop being such a fucking idiot you assmunch!”

“Bed!”

“No!”

“Fine!”

“Uh… Sollux?” Karkat says.
You look behind you. Both he and John and floating. Oops. You lower them back to the ground.

“Let’s get the shit and go.”

You push past Mituna and lead them to the safe.

turdas, 30th frostfall, 4e201

karkat’s okay. i’m okay. it’s all okay. we delivered the money and information to vriska and she told us we had to go meet with mrs. peixes. she was kind of pissed the mission took so long, but she gave us another one. we’re supposed to go back to whiterun and “finfiltrate” the meadery there.

karkat didn’t want to go back right away. he actually wants to head more towards winterhold. when he told me that i had to ask why since he hates the college so much, but he pointed out that it’s only going to get colder from here on out, and if we want to do anything in the north before spring it should probably be as soon as possible. and i actually did want to see what'll happen at kynesgrove, so we’re going to keep heading north but we're planning to turn back by the 15th of sun’s dusk no matter what.

that doesn't give us too much time, but it'll have to do. stupid winter, making things difficult!

As soon as you and Karkat start approaching Kynesgrove snow begins to fall. It's official, you’ve made it back to the north. It grows heavier and heavier and soon you’re trekking through a full blizzard.

Up ahead you see a dark spot. It grows bigger and bigger, and eventually you recognize it’s a person. And they’re running straight for you. You hear her voice, but the wind makes it too hard to understand until she’s about five feet away from you. By then you can see that she’s not dressed for the weather at all. She doesn’t even have a cloak. So what in Oblivion is she doing?

You’re about to tell her to get inside when she says, “Dragons! Run!”

She sprints past you and you look over at Karkat. He swallows, you nod, and you start sprinting towards the burial site.

To your surprise, it’s not roaring you hear. Instead there are these deep, calm words that seem to come from everywhere at once. Clear, without the trace of the animalistic screeches you’re used to. And it’s oddly familiar… You look over towards Karkat and, yeah, looks like he's hearing something too. Okay, then. This is really happening, and something weird is going on.

You reach the top of the hill before you realize why. Long fat coils of green scales block out the clouds. Fire of every hue surrounds the monster’s body. It fixes its terrifying flashing eyes on you. This is Helgen all over again.

But this time you’re armed. This time you have your hammer and your magic and-

It takes a deep breath and shouts at the ground, shooting down a vortex of heat and color. Then bones begin to rise out of the ground. Through the dust and light you see reddish fire and pieces of skin begin to gather onto the dragon’s skeleton.

The first dragon says something else, though it's not a shout. You’re unsure if it’s directed at you or the newly risen dragon.
“You cannot even speak our tongue? Pathetic.”

Ah, you guess it was you.

Massive black wings spread wide and the first dragon rises into the clouds. It calls back something in the Dragon’s language. You’re not sure what it said, but it sure sounded smug.

Oh, now *there’s* that beastly roar. You turn back to the other dragon. This one seems a lot more familiar, and a lot more killable. You grip your hammer and Karkat takes his sickles. This you can handle.

John’s distracted. His movements are sloppy, slow. He goes to try to break one of the dragon’s wings and just ends up hitting its side instead. The retaliating fire spray barely misses his head. You grit your teeth and adjust your grip. You have to handle this quickly.

You begin to run towards the dragon, but a woman comes from behind and outpaces you. She begins hacking at the more delicate wing tissue, trying to ground it. But a sword like hers is the wrong combination of brute and sharp to get through a dragon, especially since she’s going for its flanks.

But now John is on one side and she’s on the other. The dragon keeps turning its head back and forth, so confused about which annoyance to take care of first that it isn’t paying the slightest bit of attention to what’s in front of it.

Joints are the weakness on any dragon. Wrists, knees, armpits, the juncture of the neck and spine beneath the crest, your sickles have wound up buried in all of them. But there’s one more spot: the base of the jaw, where the skin is stretchy to allow the dragon to consume bigger prey. And with this fucker swinging his head around like that, it’ll be easy.

Then the dragon moves its wing, and a claw strikes out, pinning the woman to the ground. She flails with her sword, but the angle is wrong for her to do any damage. It opens its mouth, either to shout or to bite her in two.

You won’t be there in time.

“Hey, Fucknugget!”

It lifts its head and stares straight at you. Then the head goes back, the mouth comes open again. Oh god that was stupid.

A wall of ice shoots up in front of you. You don't think, you don't have time to. You throw your arms in front of your face and instinctively reach inside for fire. You can’t use Ancestors Wrath half the time, but now it’s listening to you for once. It’s warm and gentle on your skin, but the ice melts before it can actually hurt you. Then the ice stops. You take a deep breath and Ancestor's Wrath fades away. John stands triumphant, his hammer embedded in the Dragon’s eye socket. He pulls his weapon back as the dragon’s flesh begins to burn.

“You okay?” He yells over the roar of the fire. “I saw the ice and then the fire, and then-”

“Yeah! I’m fine!” You jog over to him.

You don’t know you’ve ever seen him look so relieved. “Good.”

The dragon’s soul pours into him and then he turns to the woman. “What about you?”
“A bit embarrassed,” she admits, sheathing her sword, “but I believe all that is wounded is my pride.”

John laughs. “So did I pass?” You cock your head to the side. Pass what?

“Yes indeed you did.” Then she turns to you. “As do you. I’m sorry I ever doubted you.”

“What?”

“Follow me back to the inn. The snow may have stopped, but I believe we might be more comfortable around a fire.”

You follow John and the woman, wondering when things are going to start to make sense.

Delphine seems properly grateful now. She gets you and Karkat dinner and drinks before sitting you down.

“Right,” Karkat says. “So now wanna explain to me why an innkeeper from a one horse town in Whiterun is up here fighting dragons?”

“I am one of the last members of the Blades,” she says.

“Oh. Shit, I’m guessing you’ve been hiding scared shitless of the Thalmor all this time?”

Oh man, if looks could kill… “I was not ‘scared shitless’ as you so eloquently put it. You saved my life, but that’s no reason to be so rude. I’m telling you what you want to know. The other blades and I never gave up searching for the Dragonborn. We just had to move our search underground after the war.”

“So anyway, Delphine,” You shoot Karkat a look that hopefully conveys that he should be nice. “Can you tell us what’s really going on now?”

She sighs. “Not much more than the legends, I’m afraid. Alduin is back, and he’s raising dragons from the dead.”

“So was that him, then? That big weird dragon earlier?”

“Yes. He has many names. Some places call him The Lord of Time, World Eater, or simply The Demon.”

"Appropriate for Shadow's eve, huh?" You joke.

"No," Karkat grumbles. "Carving gourds and getting really drunk is appropriate. This is not."

Delphine ignores you and continues. "There are those who say he has a true name different from the rest, though it matters little. He has only returned but his danger will soon be unparalleled. If we do nothing one day we shall wake only to find ash and dust.”

“So this is it?” Karkat asks, “The apocalypse.”

“Not necessarily,” Delphine says. “If John is successful in stopping Alduin, this may simply be the dawning of a new age.”

"So what are we gonna do?"
She takes a long swig of ale and then sets down the bottle. “For now we need do more undercover work. And for that I’ll need your help.” She pulls out a large book, emblazoned with the symbol of the empire. “First, we have to discover why this is happening now. From my research, the dragons seem to be connected to the Thalmor. We need to find out of this is true.”

“How?” You ask.

“The two of you are going to infiltrate their embassy.”

Winter is tightening its hold on the northern half of Skyrim. Last night you left Kynesgrove heading North. Delphine told you there wasn’t much else you could do for now. Your best bet at sneaking in won’t be until their big party for Saturalia in Evening Star. But a Dragonborn’s work is never done, and you’ve decided to follow John as he drags you blindly across Nírn.

This morning you awoke to find frost on your bedroll and the eerie silence that meant the last of the insects have burrowed into holes somewhere or died in the cold. The few birds that are still around make cries that echo across the land that is quickly becoming desolate.

Being tangled up in John gives you some protection from the cold, but trying to peel away to dress fully is a difficult battle. But that’s too bad, because you have to do it. If you want to repair Azura’s star and if John wants to return those books to the college you need to move quickly. Otherwise the roads will become completely impassible with snow and ice and you’ll be trapped in one place until First Seed at the earliest.

Thankfully, you’re most of the way there now. You made it around Windhelm yesterday, and now you’re at the foot of the mountains. Tonight you should reach the Shrine of Azura. You’ve been waiting for this chance since you found out the Star was real. Getting to the shrine is so much easier now that you know the way, and you practically run up the mountain.

Aranea stands at the altar at the base of the statue, exactly where she was when you left her.

“Have you brought it?” She asks.

You reach into your pack and remove a bundle of cloth. Carefully, you place it on the altar and peel away the wrappings to reveal the broken pieces of the star.

“It’s worse than I expected, but no worse than I feared,” she says, examining a larger shard. “I shall now commune with the goddess.” She places one hand on either side of the star. “Oh Azura, Lady of Twilight, Mother of the Rose, Queen of the Night Sky, please grant me the power to heal your star!”

A huge gust of wind appears from nowhere. It nearly bowls John over, but you manage to steady him. Aranea lifts her hands towards the statue and continues to speak, thought you can no longer hear her.

After a few moments, her eyes go wide and the wind abruptly stops. The star has not moved or changed in the slightest.

“Well?” You ask. “What did she say?”

“She says… she says she wishes to speak to you.”

“Okay…” John says.
“No, not you… Just Karkat.”

“Me?”

She nods. You take a step forward and look towards the statue’s face.

*Well, hello Karkat.*

Her voice enters your head, surrounding you and nowhere, sweet and terrifying, much like Meridia had done.

*You’ve been quite busy, haven’t you? Sheogorath, Meridia, and now me. Quite the champion of daedra.*

You’re not sure what to do, so you remain silent.

*You wish to purify my star, do you not?*

“Well, yes.”

*There are several ways to do so. The first is to allow it to return to my realm, but I doubt you’d like to wait the hundred years or so for that.*

“Um, right.”

*The second is a more… manual approach. You will enter my star and defeat Malyn. Alone.*

You nod. Not much stranger than anything else that’s happened recently, really.

*Are you ready, Karkat?*

“I’d like to say goodbye first.”

*As you wish.*

You step away and feel her presence fade from your mind.

“What’s up?” John asks.

“I’m going in.”

John swallows. *You sure?*

“It’s the only way.”

He nods. “Well then… Good luck.”

“Wait, what?!” Aranea screeches.

You choose to ignore her.

John steps forward and gives you a kiss. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Okay.”

You step back to the altar.
“I’m ready.”

Light surrounds you and you’re gone.

The light fades and you stand alone with Aranea.

“So that’s it then?” You ask.

“I suppose it is.”

“So now we wait, I guess,” you say.

“I guess…”

“So.”

“Ugh! How can you be so nonchalant about all this?!” She demands.

You take your eyes away from the statue. She’s crying, making the whites of her eyes even redder than usual and the unusual steel grey of her irises stand out even more.

“Well… I guess it’s because I trust him.”

The place you appear is really fucking weird. The ground is made of pale blue hexagons, and strange tall blue crystals grow up around you. About forty feet back you see a figure wearing black robes. That must be him.

"Ah," he says, "My disciples have sent me a fresh soul. Good. I was getting… hungry."

You growl and draw your sickles.

"Wait… There's something different about you…” He actually sounds scared.

Good.

"It's over, Varen," you say. "I'm not letting you fuck around in here anymore."

"I'd like to see you stop me." His voice wobbles with uncertainty. He summons a daedra, which begins launching fireballs at you.

There's not much room to strafe, but you manage to dodge and start charging forward. The man's eyes go wide and he turns and runs.

"Oh no you don't!"

You get around the daedra and bury your sickles in his shoulders. Varen screams. But the daedrea is still behind you. You turn, pulling Varen with you. The fireball hits him and he screams again and then goes limp. Another fireball wizzes past from behind you. Shit, there are more of them! But he's dead. How are there more of them?

You yank your sickles free and run back towards where you appeared.

"Well done, Champion," Azura says. "Now that Malyn Varen is dead the star is free to purify itself. Now, let us return you to your own realm before you are cleansed."
The crystals begin to glow, but you just keep running away from the daedra. Then there's a flash of light and you're back in Skyrim.

Aranea kneels on the ground clutching her face. John crouches beside her, one hand placed on her back reassuringly.

“Shit! What happened?!?”

She shakes her head. “When you were in the star I received my final vision. I saw what happened and then… Azura told me I no longer needed to be here. She took my sight.”

“Wait, so you’re blind now?” John asks.

“No.” She opens her eyes and looks up. With relief, you see they’re back to their natural color, the trademark Serket blue. “I think I’ll be alright. It’s just… Kind of a shock.”

“So what are you going to do now?” you ask.

“I’m not sure yet. But don’t worry about me. You’ve got more important things to do, I believe.”

“You sure?” John asks.

“I’m sure. Go.”

You look at John, he looks at you, and then the two of you walk away, leaving the broken Dunmer behind.

sundas 2nd sun's dusk, 4e201

made it to the college nice and early today and talked to urag. we returned the books with no problem, but before we could do much else one of the mages showed up and said there was a guy from the psijic order who was sitting in the arch mage's office and refusing to speak to anyone but me.

so we followed her upstairs. rose and kanaya were already there, talking to the monk, but he was apparently being stubborn. then as soon as he saw me he went and did that time freezy thing again so he could give me a warning about how dangerous the eye of magnus is. like we didn’t already know.

i asked him what i could do, but he said my job was mostly “containing the aftershocks.” whatever that means. but thankfully he did give us one clue. he said to try to find the augur of dunlain, though he didn’t know where it was.

after that he just unfroze everything and walked away as though nothing had happened.

the first thing we did was ask kanaya, and she happened to know just where we needed to look. she said the augur is somewhere called the midden, but it’s a dangerous place.

so, of course, we’re heading down there as soon as we’re done with lunch.

The midden isn't actually all that hard to get to. All you need to do is pop open the trap door in the courtyard and you're there. It’s eerie, strange energies permeating through the walls and putting a slight bubbly sensation in your belly. Karkat seems not to notice, or at least not to care.
Maybe it’s the fact that in spite of all of the old broken bones that litter the cavern floor there are next to no enemies. You encounter an ice wraith or two, but except for them all is still and silent.

You want to get out, but the Augur is more important than an occasional funny feeling! So you press ahead. Finally, after like an hour of looking around you find the first door in the place that seems to be locked.

Karkat pushes you aside to try to pick it, but then you hear a voice.

“Persistence will only lead to disappointment, you know.”

Karkat steps away from the door. Apparently he heard it too.

“But I suppose it is nothing I can do to stop it. Enter, if you must.”

The door flies open, revealing a small round chamber filled with light. As your eyes adjust to the new brightness, you see the source of the light itself. It is a massive sphere, a good ten feet in diameter. It glows a pale blue.

"A-are you the Augur?” You ask.

“Indeed I am. And you are the dragonborn. And Karkat. Hi, Karkat.”

"Uh, hi." Karkat says.

"I know it would be polite to say it was nice to see you again, but it seems time is short as things have now well and truly begun. What is it you seek?"

"I guess I just want to know what’s going on," you admit. "This is all just happening so quick, and I have no idea what I’m doing."

"Do you really?” The Augur asks. “And what is it you seek from that knowledge? Meaning or protection? Knowledge gives neither. All it begets is doom.”

"How are you so sure of that?” You ask.

“Because I have more than enough knowledge. I learned how it consumes, how it conquers, corrupts, and divides. It is what put me in this state, and what will usher in the end of this age. I have seen it. Men and mer alike will find knowledge’s light to be too much and must either stand and go mad or retreat into a new dark age.”

You and Karkat both stand silent, unsure of how to react.

“What the hell are you giving me that look for?!” The orb turns a vivid red.

"A monk from the Psijic order told me you’d be able to help us…” You say.

“Of course he did. Those assholes probably think the secrets of the universe grow on trees. But,” The Augur turns back to a pale blue and its voice grows soft again. “I suppose you will learn anyway. The two of you are different. You are being guided towards something. Alduin, sure, but there’s something else. Something greater, but where you are being guided and by whom is beyond even my sight. Though perhaps not hers…”
“Whose?”

“Not important. When the time comes you will learn. For now, seek the Staff of Magnus. It is the only thing that can control the eye. The arch mage will know where to find it. Now if that is good enough for you, farewell.”

Without giving you the chance to say anything, the augur disappears, leaving behind nothing but blue and red coals.

Karkat places his hand lightly on your shoulder. “I don’t think we’re gonna get more out of it. We should head back.”

“Yeah,” you agree. “We probably should.”

You turn and leave the chamber, and walk back through the midden. By the time you make it back to the surface night has well and truly begun. But you know you need to tell the arch mage about having to find the staff. Kanaya stands in the courtyard, talking to a few of the older mages.

“Hello Karkat, John,” She says, nodding to each of you in turn. “How was your mission?”

“Great,” you say, “But we’ve gotta talk to the archmage!”

“Well, she’s a bit busy at the moment… Would it be able to wait?”

“No for too long. It's about the Eye of Magnus. We know what we have to do to control it!”

She raises an eyebrow. “Alright then. Follow me, please.”

Kanaya leads you and Karkat to her room. When you enter, the Arch-mage is sitting at a table with someone else. It’s impossible to tell who because their face is hidden in the shadow of their maroon cloak. But something about them feels oddly familiar, and you find yourself suddenly very sure that it's a he, even before he moves and you get a good look at his clothes.

“I’m sorry, my darling,” Kanaya says. “This is rather urgent.”

“That’s fine,” the man says, standing. His voice is a little on the high side, and he has just the lightest touch of an accent you can’t quite place. “I was on my way out anyway. Rose?”

“Yes?”

“Remember what we talked about.”

She smiles calmly. “Of course. I presume I’ll be seeing you soon then?”

“Yeah. ‘Til then.” He nods at her and leaves. All you manage to see as he makes his way past you is a pale, rounded chin.

“Now,” Rose rests her chin on her hands. “What is it you wished to discuss?”

———

You enter the arcanium. Thankfully, there’s no one there but Urag, sitting in in the same chair as always.

“Hmm,” he says. “I must admit I’m surprised to see you here.”

“I know, but, I have a book for you to look at.”
“Is that so?”

You pull it from your pack and show it to him. “It was in a cave full of necromancers. But I can’t read it.”

The orc takes it from you and thumbs through the pages. He hums to himself with interest and then says, “This is quite the artifact you’ve found.”

“Can you tell me what it is?” You ask.

“Not yet. It’s ancient. First era at least. Decoding it will take me a while.”

“How long?”

“Hard to say. Several days at the least.”

“What?! We’re heading out!”

“Well, it’s the most I can do. Perhaps just leave it here for a while.”

“Alright. Just… Can you keep this between us?”

“I won’t say a word to John. Good luck, Karkat.”

---

**TIRDAS 4TH SUN’S DUSK, 4E201**

THE ARCH MAGE, AS IT TURNS OUT, DID NOT REALLY KNOW WHERE THE STAFF OF MAGNUS WAS. INSTEAD, SHE SENT US BACK TO MZULFT. IF WHAT SHE SAID IS TRUE, THIS GUY NAMED THE SYNOD SHOULD BE THERE, WHICH MEANS WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO GET IN THIS TIME.

MAYBE THIS TIME I’LL BE ABLE TO FIND SOMETHING WORTH HAVING. WELL, AND THE STAFF OF MAGNUS. THAT’S PROBABLY A THING WE SHOULD BE GETTING TOO.

BUT BY THE TIME WE MADE IT HERE IT WAS LATE AND JOHN AND I WERE BOTH EXHAUSTED. WE’RE SPENDING THE NIGHT BACK IN THE STOREROOM. WE ENTER MZULFT TOMORROW.

---

**middas, 5th sun’s dusk, 4e201**

we raided mzulft today. it didn’t go particularly well, but we probably should have known that since the first thing we found was a dead mage. turns out there was this research team that went in, but they hadn’t really planned for the falmer or the dwarven traps. the only researcher we found alive had locked himself in a room and was desperately waiting for supplies.

the staff wasn’t here. whatever karkat’s searching for wasn’t here. all we found was an old thingie that showed places with a lot of magic. surprisingly, there were only two marks on it. there was one in winterhold (i’m assuming that’s the eye) and another in laberynthian. that’s probably where the staff actually is.

karkat doesn’t think we’ll make it back there in time before the winter sets in, so that’ll have to wait until spring.
i just hope everything can be okay for that long…

turdas 6th sun’s dusk, 4e201

we just headed west from mzulft, and with all the little volcanoes in this part of skyrim it feels like last seed again. i don’t understand why no one settled here. other than the lava. and the fact that it smells like rotten eggs. hmm. maybe we should just go back to battlehorn for the winter so we don’t freeze to death.

but we got to go on a proper bandit raid today! that was exciting! it ended up being kind of sad, though. we ran into a man on the way, who was looking for his wife. he thought she’d been captured, but it turned out she’d run away and had become the leader of the bandits.

it was honestly kind of sad. i like it better when we don't have to learn about our enemies' life stories. that's probably not right, but…

i donno, maybe taking a break from bandits was actually a good thing. at least when we were fighting necromancers most of the things we were killing weren't really alive. i think i’m done writing for tonight.

john: yeah. we’re not too good at it, though.

KARKAT: TO ELABORATE, JOHN CRUSHED AN IRON DAGGER WE WERE TRYING TO MAKE BEYOND ALL RECOGNITION AND I ENDED UP JUST BREAKING NEEDLES TRYING TO MAKE LEATHER BRACERS.

john: pretty sure we’ll be leaving it to the professionals from now on…
Chapter Notes

I did manage to get this done on time. yay!

and please, guys. I know my audience isn't that big, so if you could leave a comment that would mean so much to me. I put a lot of work into this story, and even though at this point I want to just be able to say it's done, a little bit of appreciation and validation goes a long, long way to keep me motivated.

but still, thank you for even sticking with me this far!

You always did like fall. Spring barely edges it out, because that's when your birthday is, but the Colovian Highlands are the best in the fall. That’s when the winds from the north blow away the stifling heat of the summer, and the ripe wheat turns the rolling hills gold. And everyone in town is excited because it's the harvest and also one of the better times for hunting, so there's plenty of food to go around and all kinds of festivals as the world gives you small polite reminders that winter will be coming soon.

Skyrim isn't like that. In Skyrim, it's nice and warm one evening because you're on the volcanic plain and then the next morning you wake up with frost on your bedroll. In Skyrim the wind tears across the plain like wild boars during rutting season, and it only gets worse when steam vents stop disturbing the air currents. It's like being back at the coast, except for this time at least you don't have to worry about spray making you even colder.

Yeah, not wanting to travel in winter is starting to make a lot more sense. You've had to double up your cloaks. The nice thick wool ones are great when the air is still, but the wind cuts through it like it was silk. But the sealed canvas ones do a surprisingly good job of holding that off. It also helps to have a warm horse under you.

"Hey Karkat?" You ask at one point.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Shadowmere minds being ridden less now that we're helping him keep warm?"

"He didn't seem to upset about it before," he points out. "And I'm sure he still misses the burning fires of Oblivion. Right boy?"

You snort. "The Dark Brotherhood don't even care about the Daedra."

The horse throws his head a little bit.

"See? He agrees with me."

"He just likes you better," Karkat grumbles. "Even though Gamzee gave him to me."
You shrug. "It's because I know how to take care of him. If you want I could-"

"No, Azura forbid I stop you from bonding with a creature at your own level of intelligence."

"Haha, good one. It was almost as funny as the first thousand times you said it."

"That's a lot of sarcasm, Egbert. Maybe I'm a good influence on you after all."

You do actually laugh this time.

In the few short days you were gone every speck of green has vanished from Whiterun. Because of the winds some of the trees are already bare. You want to get inside as quickly as possible, but the stablehand takes _forever_ to get Shadowmere checked in. Probably because she doesn't want to be out in the wind either.

But eventually she takes your damn money and you and Karkat get past the walls. You work your way back to your house, selling some of your loot and grabbing some food from a vendor on the way. Adrienne clears out the last of your pilfered weapons and finally you and Karkat get back to your house.

The door's unlocked, and when you let yourself in you find Lydia sitting at the table with some other people you recognize as housecarls. They seem to be deep in conversation.

Karkat looks over at you uncertainly, like this is a really weird situation for him to be in. Then again, maybe it is.

You walk forward into the kitchen area and greet them with a "Hey, Lydia."

Your housecarl startles. She gets to her feet, face red. "M-my thane! A thousand apologies. I was not expecting you to be back so soon! I was simply-"

"Don't worry about it," you say. "I just thought you should know Karkat and I are gonna be here a couple days. We'll keep you posted."

"Erm, alright?"

"We're gonna go upstairs. If you could bring up a pitcher of water or something at some point that would be great. Anyway, see you later!"

You wave a cheerful goodbye and head upstairs. Oh Stendarr it feels nice to drop your stuff. You roll your shoulders and then start peeling off your thick, heavy traveling clothes. Karkat starts sorting through your stuff, but he keeps looking up and giving you these thoughtful looks.

"What's up?" You ask.

"Thinking about how you were downstairs. Wondering if you're weird or if Windhelm's weird."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you were _way_ nicer than I thought you'd be. I mean, she brought other people in."

"So?"

"So there are a lot of Dunmer who make their livings as servants, and their bosses would be super pissed if they pulled something like that."
"Huh." You pull on a clean shift. "Might be a city thing too, since we knew everyone in town. Do you think I should be more worried? We can talk to her tomorrow if you'd-"

"No. I didn't say it was a bad thing." His voice has a surprising amount of tenderness in it.

You blink at him, unsure of exactly what to say.

“Must just be the Stormcloaks being assholes. Nothing new there.” And just like that he’s blocked himself off again. Good job, John.

There’s a knock at the door. “John? Karkat? I brought you your water.”

“Oh! Thanks!” You scramble over to get the door. Lydia hands you the pitcher.

“Is there anything else you need?”

“I don’t think so. Goodnight!”

“Goodnight.”

You nudge the door closed with your foot and set the pitcher down next to the washbasin. By the time you look back at Karkat he’s already curling up in bed.

“Tired?” you ask.

He opens one eye. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Oh yeah.” You lie down beside him and run your fingers through his hair.

He makes a little happy noise but doesn’t say anything. You decide that’s probably okay.

MORNDAS, 10TH SUN’S DUSK, 4E201

WE ENDED UP DOING THE HONEYWITCH’S DIRTY WORK AGAIN TODAY. MAYBE IT WAS FOR THE BETTER, BECAUSE SABJORN, THE Fucker WHO RAN THE MEADERY, WAS APPARENTLY KIND OF A TOTAL WASTE OF SPACE AND WE ENDED UP KILLING A CRAZY GUY WHO WANTED TO TAKE OVER THE WORLD WITH SKEEVERS, BUT IT STILL JUST DIDN’T FEEL RIGHT. I DON’T LIKE WORKING FOR THE PEIXES.

I PICKED UP A FEW BOUNTIES TODAY, SO WE HAVE ENOUGH TO DO IN THIS AREA THAT WE SHOULDN’T BE HEADING BACK TO RIFTEN FOR A WHILE.

dear dad,

and uncle joel if you're reading this please do give it to dad. most of cyrodiil might not be able to tell your handwriting apart but i can and i really did want to talk to dad. thanks.

hi! i hope you’re doing well back home! i know it’s been a long time since i’ve written, and i’m really sorry for that. karkat and i have been running all over trying to get as much done as we can before winter sets in.

there's way more bandits here than there ever were back home and i don't know i can't quite sometimes adventuring is a little tougher than i thought it would be. you're always so sure about
everything, and you know you're always making the right choices. i wish you could have taught me how to do that before i left. or that things here were as simple as they are back home but everyone's so desperate that i...

but anyway, how are your preparations going? i know there’s always so much to do around the castle, i hope you’re not having too much trouble without the extra help this year! here’s a little bit of gold and a neat dwarven gizmo we found in one of the ruins. i hope you can get some stuff done with that, maybe hire someone to help you close up the draftier wings or something.

i love you a lot. hope to hear from you soon! make sure you tell me how the others are doing too! i wouldn’t know where to send their letters and they never write back anyway.

love,

john

ps- we’re leaving whiterun tomorrow, so i’m not completely sure when i’ll get your letter, but we should be back to the house within a week or two and the couriers here are hardcore.

TIRDAS, 11TH SUN'S DUSK, 4E201

SO WE'RE TIPPING A BIT SOUTH TO PICK UP A BOUNTY ON A GIANT, YEAH WHATEVER.

BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY,

SHIT JOHN IS CARRYING IN HIS PACK TODAY (NOT INCLUDING ACTUAL SURVIVAL GEAR) :

7 PAIRS OF HIDE BOOTS
3 FUR BIKINIS THAT SOME WOMEN AROUND HERE THINK PASS AS ARMOR FOR SOME REASON
1 ENCHANTED BOW
3 HUNTING BOWS
17 ELVEN DAGGERS
4 LUMPS OF IRON ORE
2 FAMILIAR-SUMMONING STAVES (EVEN THOUGH HE CAN SUMMON FAMILIARS IN HIS SLEEP. HE HAS AND IT WAS CONFUSING AND TERRIFYING)
3 SLICES OF FRESH SALMON
5 SLICES OF NOT-SO-FRESH SALMON
2 GOURDS
9 BOTTLES OF WINE
7 RABBIT LEGS
13 CLOVES OF GARLIC
57 ASSORTED POTIONS
2 DRAGON SCALES
52 BUTTERFLY WINGS
25 MOUNTAIN FLOWERS
10 HORKER TUSKS
1 WISP WRAP
9 BOOKS
3 MAGIC SCROLLS
5 WOODEN BOWLS
3 TANKARDS
1 SKULL

A BUNCH OF OTHER SHIT I’M TOO LAZY TO COUNT.

0 FUCKS

IF HE WALKS ANY SLOWER I’M GOING TO KILL HIM AND DRAG HIS FUCKING CORPSE AROUND TO SAVE TIME.

It’s been a long day. A very, very, very long day. The walk itself wasn’t particularly hard (thankfully, you managed to convince john that some of the stuff would probably not "come in handy someday" so you're making better progress now) but you kept getting jumped by all of these wild animals! Seriously, you don’t know if you’ve ever seen so many sabercats in one place your whole life! You wonder if it’s breeding season or something.

Just before night fall, though, you find a sign of civilization, and hopefully one that’ll protect you from the damn cats. A small plaque on the front of the cottage says “Pinewatch.” John goes to knock on the door, but when he does it swings open on its own.

“Hello?” He calls. “Anyone in here?”

It sure doesn’t look like it. Cobwebs line the walls, what food is left smells like it’s been out for a while. And there are bugs everywhere. Because John has no sense of self-preservation, he walks right inside.

You sputter. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?! Do you want rockjoint? This is how you get rockjoint!"

"Chill dude and just breathe through your mouth for a minute. I'm looking for clues."

"Clues for what?"

"Why this place would be straight up abandoned."
“People leave. It happens!”

He gives you an incredulous look. "In the middle of a meal? And no bandits or wild animals have tried raiding the place?"

Well, okay, you have to admit. When he's right he's right. Against your better judgment, you cross the threshold. John seems content with this room and heads towards the cellar.

"Fucking Eight," he says. "Come take a look at this."

"You find your 'clue?'" You scoff.

“Yep!”

You roll your eyes and follow. Huh, well he found something. Everything down there is smashed apart: chairs, tables, even the bed is missing a leg and sitting at a funny angle. A dead orc lays sprawled upon the floor, an axe embedded in his back.

“Looks like this is the guy who owned the place,” he says,

“Outside of a stronghold? Weird. But some bandits must have forced the lock and gotten him. Okay, mystery solved we can leave.”

“How come we can never find a place that’s happy?” John asks. “Wait a second. Hey Karkat? You seeing what I’m seeing?”

“What?”

“The bookshelf.”

“What about it?”

“It’s in perfect condition. And some of these look like they could be worth a lot. So why would bandits just leave them?” John walks up to it and runs his hands over some of the books. “These are fake!”

“What?”

“Help me out, there’s gotta be a switch somewhere!”

While he searches each individual book, you look around the shelf. Eventually you find a little button and press it. The shelf swings open, pushing John out of the way. Behind it is a deep cave.

“Shall we?” You ask.

“I think we shall.” He replies, summoning his hammer.

You can’t help but feel strange about this place. Karkat doesn’t seem to notice anything odd, but you don’t like it. There’s been no opposition so far. You’ve come across bandits, sure, but every single one of them is dead.

Then you find a piece of paper stuck to the wall with a knife.

_You’ve all been warned about trying to break into my treasure room, but Roars didn’t think I was serious._
Now he’s dead.

You’ve all had your cut of the take already, and if I catch any of you dung lickers trying to break in again, I won’t let the traps kill you. I’ll do it myself!

-Rigel Strong-Arm

“So I’m guessing they tried to go after this treasure,” you say.

“Probably,” Karkat replies. “But there might still be a few left.”

“Right.”

As you continue your journey through the dungeon you find more and more of these letters, along with a set planning some mutiny. One specific pair you find seems to be between the leader of the bandits and her father, talking about sending money home to care for a sick mother.

“What is it with all these sad stories recently?” You ask. “First the one who left her controlling husband, now this…”

“Well, they’re human,” Karkat replies. “Plenty of people join up with bandits these days out of desperation.”

“I guess so. But then-” You cut off sharply.

“What?”

“Never mind, it’s stupid.”

"John, after all of the dumb things you've said to me, one more isn't gonna make any difference."

You roll your eyes. "Yeah, cause that makes me feel better."


And because it's Karkat, and because he's looking at you so tenderly with those gorgeous ruby-red eyes your resolve crumbles. "What makes us different from them?"

He blinks. "I hadn't expected you of all people to ask that question. I mean, come on. They're bandits."

"Yeah, and they kill people and take their things to sell for money. If any of these guys were still alive, what would we be doing right now?"

"I get your point." He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes for a minute. "Yeah, okay. Maybe no more bandit raids for a while, unless they're really terrorizing some local farmers or we're flat broke and there's a really good bounty."

You sigh with relief. "Thanks, Karkat."

"Don't worry about it." He smiles softly at you and then turns away. "Let's get out of here then."

Grinning, you follow him back out the way you came.
we came across Alduin again today. He raised another dragon, this one even tougher than the last. This time I didn’t freak the fuck out, though, which meant that it was probably actually easier for Karkat. We actually got it down pretty quick too!

Not long after we found a couple whose farm was burnt before we got there. I’d never seen anyone look so sad without crying. I gave them as much gold as they’d take. I feel almost like it’s my fault. If I’d only focused more on killing dragons than burning beehives or learning magic tricks or killing bandits…

We need to get to Solitude. I don’t think the Thalmor are involved the way Delphine thinks they are, but I have to do something. Maybe they’ll have some other party we can sneak into.

Sundas, 16th Sun’s Dusk, 4E201

John’s been acting funny again. He’s seemed kind of anemic in the past few dungeons. He was fine killing mudcrabs and wolves but he shied away from vampires and necromancers. He even had us steer clear of a giant camp so we didn’t have to fight!

I don’t know what’s going on in his head. He won’t tell me, and it’s so fucking frustrating! The bandit argument he had hit home, but come on, necromancers and vampires?! What’s next, make friends with a goddamn dragon?! I don’t know what to do. I don’t know if he needs more rest or more adventuring or what.

Fuck, I’m just really worried about him.

Morndas, 17th Sun’s Dusk, 4E201

I talked to Karkat about heading up to Solitude today, but he’s still afraid that the mountain passes will clog up and we’ll be trapped there for the winter. If you ask me there are worse places to be stuck, but I guess I understand why he doesn’t want anything to do with the imperial’s stronghold even though the Stormcloaks treat him like shit. And it would be cheaper to hole up in Whiterun since we have the house.

But the best we can do now is more training. Kill some dragons, learn some new words of power. Karkat’s actually getting to be a pretty good sparring partner. I mean, I still have to hold back a little on the strength and I almost never use magic, but it gets harder each time we fight.

We made it to a place called Ravnveig’s Fast today. There was a warlock there who filled the dungeon with the subjugated souls of his victims. It was awful. Because whenever they attached they yelled stuff like “I don’t want to do this” and “I’m sorry.” We snuck past them as best as we could, and once we killed the warlock the rest vanished. I really hope they were set free so they could move on. The ones we had to fight too. At least they’re not in pain anymore.

There’s a dragon’s nest atop this mountain. We’re hiding in the ruins for now, and tomorrow we head up to the peak.

Your chest tightens slightly with nervousness as you approach the summit. Honestly you’re still not over the “fighting fucking dragons” thing, especially since John is being kinda moody and he’s
gotten more and more reliant on magic lately, and you’re really not sure how well that works against them.

The dragon is asleep on top of a massive stone monolith.

“You ready?” You whisper

“More than ever,” he replies with a grin.

You tip one on your arrows with the most powerful poison you’ve got and take aim. He’s got an ice storm spell in one hand and some sort of conjuration one in the other.

You pull back your bow and loose an arrow. It hits the dragon in the flank and it awakens with a roar. John sends both of his spells, blasting it with ice and summoning a flame atronach.

The dragon takes to the sky and you prepare another arrow. You hear more magic noises coming from John, but you don’t spare him a look to see what he’s doing. You just shoot the damn thing again, this time hitting the delicate membrane of its wing.

A powerful ice spear comes from beside you and hits the other wing. The dragon crashes to the ground.

You grab your sickles and start closing the distance between you and the beast, but John is faster, and he’s heading straight towards its face. It rears its head back.

Both of you are expecting it to shout, but instead it bites. John tries to move out of the way, but it manages to get his arm. The pauldrons are solid enough, but they're made to deflect swords or arrows and the underside is just leather. You freeze and watch in slow motion as it pulls back. You’re expecting blood and screams, but you don’t get it.

The dragon seems surprised too. It lifts John into the air and shakes him a little bit. Luckily, John’s atronach isn’t fazed. It blasts the dragon’s eye and it lets him go. He tumbles to the ground with a yelp.

In the flash of fire, you catch a strange gleam on what of John's skin you can see. Ironflesh. Thank Arkay.

You let out a sigh of relief and then the dragon turns on you, anger blazing in its good eye. Well shit.

You dodge to the side and start running towards it, hoping that if you can get close enough it won’t be able to focus on you properly. Its gaze follows you, head adjusting. The fire on the other side is dying down, but ew you don’t think he’ll be seeing out of that again.

Once in striking range, you jump, sickles pointed to do damage. It opens its mouth to roar or shout or bite, but you never find out which because then there’s an obnoxiously colored hammer between its jaws. You get its other eye with one sickle and then dive beneath its neck to finish the job.

It sputters something and you’re covered in at least a gallon of stinking, hot dragon blood. You roll back out from under it just in time for the beast to collapse and begin to burn.

John dismisses his hammer and helps you back to your feet.

“High five?” He asks breathlessly.
“What, not even a hug?”

“Look at you, man, you’re-”

“Yeah, okay, fine. Let’s just- OW!”

Son of Azura that high five hurt.

“Sorry, I forgot about the spell,” John says, looking down at his hands, still gleaming metallic. “It should fade soon, though.”

“It’d better.” The blood on you begins to cool far too rapidly and soon you’re shivering.

“There’s a cabin just down there,” John says, pointing down the side of the mountain. “Let’s see if they can help us clean up.”

He leaps down, and you loyally follow.

TURDAS, 25TH SUN’S DUSK, 4E201

I HAVEN’T WRITTEN THE PAST FEW DAYS BECAUSE HONESTLY IT’S BEEN PRETTY BORING. AFTER WE KILLED THAT DRAGON JOHN AND I HEADED BACK TO RIFTEN BECAUSE THERE WAS NOTHING REALLY ELSE TO DO.

VRISKA SEEMED HAPPY ENOUGH THAT SABJORN WAS ARRESTED, BUT SHE WAS MARKEDLY LESS THRILLED ABOUT THE LETTER WE FOUND IN HIS CHEST. IT HAD THAT SAME MARK FROM GOLDENGLOW ON IT SO THERE’S OBVIOUSLY SOME GRANDER CONSPIRACY, BUT I’M HONESTLY NOT TOO WORRIED ABOUT IT. NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS THE SERKETS ALWAYS SEEM TO COME OUT ON TOP.

SPEAKING OF SERKETS, ARANEA CAME DOWN HERE TOO, AND SHE’S EVEN HAPPIER THAN BEFORE I THINK. WELL, SHE’S CHATTING MORE, WHICH IS REALLY SAYING SOMETHING. APPARENTLY SHE’S GREAT AT THE BEDLAM JOBS, WHICH MEANS LESS PRESSURE FOR ME AND JOHN TO DO THEM SO THANK THE GODS FOR THAT.

THE CISTERN IS PRETTY FULL NOW, SO JOHN AND I RENTED A ROOM AT THE INN. HOPEFULLY "MINDFANG" WILL HAVE MORE INFORMATION IN THE MORNING…

Mindfang has invited you down into her office. It’s not the first time your mother has done such a thing. It might be just be because you’re the easiest person to speak to since you do live in Riftweald with her, but nonetheless it is still an honor and just goes to show how much she trusts you. She should, of course, because you’re clearly the best and no one can match your skill and none can come anywhere near your luck. Yet, after all these years having her approval is- well, it’s a nice feeling.

Your mother sits behind her oak desk, an ebony dagger in her hand. She twirls it absentmindedly as she stares at the letters from Honningbrew and Goldenglow.

“Alright, I’m here,” you say. “What is it you wanted to talk about?”

“This is not looking good, my dear Vriska,” She replies, not looking up at you. “It’s even worse than I thought.”
“How so?”

“As I’m sure you noticed these notes are in the same hand and bear the same mark. What does that tell you?”

“It’s from the same person.”

“And what does their goal seem to be?”

“Screwing us over for one thing.”

“And another?” Crap. That wasn't good enough. Come on, Vriska. Think.

“They’re putting a wedge between us and Meenah,” you say, trying to hide the uncertainty in your voice.

“Exactly. And I would really rather the guild not fall out of favor with her.”

You smile, “So does that mean what I think it means?”

“Yes. We’ll have to make them pay.”

“You sound confident, Mindfang. Does that mean you know who they are?”

“Not yet, no. But I will. Whoever wrote this note,” she taps the one John and Karkat just brought in, “Made one vital mistake.”

“Oh?”

“There’s a mention of a certain Ahab.”

“So?”

“Tell me, Vriska, do you remember dear Dualscar?”

“Ugh, how can I not?”

“That’s one of his old aliases, which means he’s in league with whoever is behind this.”

“So now I go to Solitude and find him,” you say excitedly.

“No, not you. I need you here, my dear. You’re far too valuable to send on something like this. Besides, I don’t know how seriously he would take you. That’s the problem with sending your children after ex-lovers.”

She’s right, it’s beneath you. You don’t feel a tinge of sadness for not being picked for something so important. No, not at all. “Who then?”

“John and Karkat. They’re the worst thieves we have, except for maybe Eridan, but sending that boy after his father does not strike me as prudent. He’s more likely to get manipulated by Dualscar than the other way around, and that fool is too useful for extortion and his connections.”

“Right. I’ll let John and Karkat know for you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Vriska.”

Your turn to leave, but you hear Mindfang’s chair slide against the flagstones. You turn and she’s
standing in front of you, softness in her eyes. She lifts her hand and tucks a strand of hair behind your ear. “Please remember this is not because I doubt your abilities. I trust you more than anyone else in this guild. And do not forget that when I am gone you will become guild master.”

“I won’t.”

She kisses your forehead. “Now off to bed with you. I need you well rested in the morning.”

“Goodnight, mom.”

“Goodnight, my dear.”

middas 26\textsuperscript{th} sun's dusk, 4e201

vriska gave us our new assignment today. and it’s up in solitude.

thankfully, now karkat agrees that there’s too much there for us to just ignore, but that doesn’t change that it’s winter now. the only safe way to get there will be to hire a carriage. but it’s expensive, 200 gold for a trip, and it only costs that little because karkat and i agreed to be liable for our own things if we’re attacked by bandits. but we’re heading off first thing tomorrow.

apparently this year we’ve only had little snow storms province-wide, but karkat says sometime around now every year they get dumped on. i just really hope that doesn’t happen during our trip… as it is the carriages refuse to go straight north this late in the year. With the prevailing winds it’s actually safer to go over open tundra and only duck into the mountains at the last minute, when we’re far enough over that most of the clouds from the sea have dropped their snow.

wish us luck!

You’re asleep when it happens, snuggling with John beneath a blanket to absorb what heat you can off of his stupidly warm body. The cart rocks beneath you. Unlike John, this has never bothered you. Actually, you've always found carts pretty soothing, which is probably why you managed to pass out while wearing full armor. So you sleep perfectly peacefully, pressed up against your partner right up until you don't.

A loud screeching roar forces your eyes open, but you're too groggy to fully process it. By the time you do, John has thrown you over his shoulder and is running. A moment later the cart is nothing but a pile of ash. The horse panics and gallops away, bits of flaming trace still attached.

John sets you down, but by this point enough panicked energy is rushing through you that you’re ready. You just have to find the-

Suddenly the area around you grows dark. You look up and see the shadow of a dragon pass over the sun. Your sickles are at the ready, but John’s already rushing forward, warhammer in hand and atronach at his side.

As soon as the bastard lands-

He’s not landing. In fact, he’s flying away. You and John exchange a look before rushing after him. This isn’t the best terrain for a chase. The ground is a horrendous combination of frozen and swamp. You’re soaked up to your mid-thigh and fucking freezing, but you can’t stop now. John’s looking too damn determined and he’s moving too quickly. You can keep up fine when he had his armor, but since he’s just wearing travelling clothes his stamina’s a lot higher.
But luckily the dragon’s stopped. You smile until you hear the screams. Then you run even faster. Through the trees you manage to spot Morthal ahead of you. The dragon shouts downward, a plume of fire coming from its mouth.

Little arrows fly from below, no doubt the work of the guards. But they can’t beat a dragon. Not for good.

John’s in fireball range by now, and he’s doing his best, as is his atronach. By the time you get there they’ve managed to down the beast. With so many people fighting it goes down fast, and John absorbs its soul, leaving the burning skeleton in the middle of the town.

John drops his hammer and it fades before it hits the ground. Then he just stands there, eerily still. He’s looking straight ahead, and once the fire clears you see what he was staring at.

On the other side of the dragon’s remains you see the charred bodies of a woman and child.

Everyone bursts into cheers.

"The beast is dead!"
"Finally!"
"We're safe!"
"All hail the dragonborn!"

"What do you mean finally?" John asks slowly.

A red-faced old man pats him on the back. "Oh, that damned dragon has been terrorizing this area for weeks now! Glad someone finally managed to put an end to it."

John goes pale. Er… relatively.

"But I think this calls for a celebration!" The innkeeper, a young redguard woman shouts. "Everyone to Moorside! I’m bringing up as much ale as we can drink!"

Everyone rushes to the inn and you’re both swept up in the crowd. But once you’re actually inside, John just throws a few coins on the counter and slinks off to an empty room and shuts the door behind him. You follow and find him sitting on the bed with his back against the wall, knees pulled to his chest.

You’re not really sure what to do next. You know he probably needs to take a minute too. You lost most of your supplies in the fire. Maybe if you go back and loot the remains tomorrow you’ll be able to retrieve some of the-

“It’s my fault.” John says.

“What’s your fault?” You ask.

“Those people didn’t have to die.”

You sit down next to him and put an arm around him, pulling him close. “Don’t beat yourself up too much. Yeah, it’s tragic, young lives cut short and blah-de-blah, but this might be the actual end of the world. Between that and the civil war a lot of people are going to die. It happens.”

“But it shouldn't have to.” He turns his face towards you. There are tears starting to well up in his
gorgeous blue eyes. He might as well have reached into your chest and started squeezing your heart.

“Look, John,” you say. “You can always argue that if you’d done this or that in the fight more people could have lived, but I know you do your best and that’s all you can do. There’s no way to know that shit in the moment, you know?”

“It’s not that. I’m the Dragonborn. It’s my job to do everything I can to stop the end of the world, to kill all the dragons. But I haven’t been doing that. I’ve been running around like a fucking idiot doing everything but.”

“John…” You’re not sure what to say. Nothing feels comforting enough. Nothing feels right. You know a shitton about hating yourself, so you should be able to share some sage wisdom but you can’t even-

No, bad Karkat. This is about John. Not about you.

Instead you just kiss him.

He pulls away. “What are you doing?”

“Kissing you?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It was all I could think of!”

“Sorry…” He looks down.

Shh, you hear that? That is the sound of your heart shattering into a million pieces.

You grab him by the shoulders and force him to look at you. “Now don’t you be sorry! Look, John, maybe you’ve been an idiot. I’ve definitely been an idiot. But there’s nothing we can do about that. All we can do is keep going.” You roll out the map and point to where you are. “If we push we can easily make it to Solitude in a day. Then we can talk to Delphine’s friend. Forget the Guild work for now. Maybe even tell Vriska she can go fuck herself.”

“Karkat…”

“If you feel so responsible for this shit, then we can focus on doing it. We’ll find out what the Thalmor know and then maybe we can go find out what the Greybeards aren’t telling us.”

John smiles and embraces you. “Thanks,” he says.

"Don't worry. I've got you."

If he starts to cry, you're going to pretend not to notice.

Anonymous said:
I don't know if you're still accepting prompts, but what if John and Karkat switched bodies/ weapons and armor for the day?
KARKAT: I'D HOLD THINGS ABOVE HIS HEAD. ALL DAY. AND SHOUT TO KNOCK HIM OVER.

john: well damn. i was gonna say cuddle and enjoy being little spoon for once. maybe i’ll just summon your chaurus and clean his shell in front of you instead.

KARKAT: OH… WELL HE’LL STILL KNOW I’M ME. PROBABLY.

john: well anyway good luck controlling chaos magic and telling what's real and what's not~

KARKAT: I DIDN'T MEAN IT, YOU DOOFUS. YOU KNOW THAT. I WOULDN'T REALLY DO THAT TO YOU.

john: yeah, I know :)

KARKAT: YEAH RIGHT. EVEN IF SOMEONE WOULD TAKE ME, THE LAST THING THE WORLD NEEDS RIGHT NOW IS SOMEONE WHO WAS LEFT ALONE WITH ME AS AN INNOCENT LITTLE KID.

john: of course i'm gonna be doing that stuff. it's basically a requirement. i'll be running battlehorn castle after dad's gone and someone will have to run it after me. and because of the blood-oath thing adoption won't cut it. but i’d like to stay with karkat, so we’ll have to get a consort for that at some point.
You’re bored. You are so bored. You’ve been here for over a week now and nothing has happened. There are no dragons to fight, no in-town errands to run, no nothing. But Northwind’s Prayer is only a few days away and this time of year it would be too risky to leave the city.

You hate waiting. Who knows what kind of stuff could be happening while you and karkat just sit on your asses and do nothing?

Well, it's not exactly nothing. Karkat managed to pick up a little extra work making potions at the apothecary and it’s easy enough for you to practice alteration and conjuration at the inn. You were worried about training at Castle Dower at first, but then you ran into the redguard legate from Helgen in the smithy and she didn’t try to arrest you, so you’ve been able to get in and use their facilities.

You’ve tried getting into the Shivering Isles to see the Colonel again, or maybe talk to Nanna, but you can't even do that. Whatever ties that wing of the castle had to Oblivion seems to be gone after Karkat freed Pelagius. Things are better when Karkat gets back. There's sparring and… other stuff you can do together which helps work out some of the tension. Plus since you're separated most of the day you’re actually getting new things to talk about.

*Useless. You're fucking useless.*

You push it down, more out of habit than because you actually think it's wrong this time. Who knows what Alduin is up to? Who knows what the Thalmor are up to? Skyrim is in danger, and you can’t do a fucking thing.

For anyone.

You’ve sunk to the level of cleaning your stupid room as you wait for your oakflesh and magelight to wear off. But there's only so much you can do in such a tiny room. So now you just have to sit on the bed, doing nothing. You contemplate going to the Bard's college to borrow a book or something, but the snow’s coming down heavy and wet and disgusting outside.

The door opens. Karkat comes in and throws his bow and quiver on the table. "Gods I'm exhausted," he says. "They got a new group of recruits and they'd never fought anyone who used sickles before, so the captain on duty pulled me aside and made me fight the damn kids for hours. Most of them sucked balls, but still. Apparently I'd still lose to twenty fifteen year olds. They said they were fifteen, anyway. I swear they all looked like they were twelve."
You snort. "You sound like my aunt."

"What do you mean?" He asks as he pulls off one of his boots.

"Every time I see her she swears the apprentice battlemages get younger every year."

He sighs and unfastens his cloak. "Yeah, no, not like that. More like I think they might be planning to ship actual children to the front lines."

"Oh."

*Way to go, idiot.*

You shake your head. Your stupid brain is being decidedly unhelpful today but you don't have time to deal with that.

"Maybe… maybe it was just basic training stuff?"

Karkat shakes his head. "I guess we can hope. Because there's not too much we could do about it anyway."

"Hey," you say, patting the bed beside you. "Come here."

He sits down and lets you pull him close. You run your fingers through your hair. "So here's the plan," you say. "First we go to the Thalmor Embassy in a couple days. Then we beat up Alduin and save the world. After that, we're gonna get Ulfric and the Emperor to sit down and talk it out."

"Yeah. Sounds like a plan. Let me bet every single septim I have on that plan, because it sounds absolutely fucking flawless. Nothing could possibly go wrong. It's not like the odds are so astronomically against us that-"

"Shhh." You start scratching his scalp gently. He manages to put up a little bit of a fight before he melts into you. "There we go, that's better."

"I hate you," he grumbles.

"I love you too."

One of his hands settles on your thigh. It's warm and soft; you can feel it clearly through the thin fabric of your robes.

"Oh hey, oakflesh wore off," you murmur.

"If that's the set-up for a dick joke, Egbert, I swear to every single Divine, Daedra, and weird backwater god…"

"Pfft, no."

"That's just because I caught you."

"…Maybe."

Karkat rolls his eyes. "Yeah, right. Oh yeah, a courier gave me this for you."

He rummages through one of his pouches and pulls out a small cream-colored envelope. Oh, you'd recognize that thick block lettering anywhere. When you take the letter and turn it over, it's sealed
with a blob of wax bearing your family crest. You break it open and read your father's letter.

SON,

I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE GOING THROUGH. THE FIRST FEW MONTHS AWAY FROM HOME ARE A DIFFICULT AND CONFUSING PART OF ANY MAN'S LIFE. THIS IS PART OF WHY I ASKED YOU TO GO, SO YOU CAN FACE THIS WHILE I AM STILL HERE.

IN ALL HONESTY, I AM LESS CERTAIN OF MY CHOICES THAN I LIKELY APPEAR TO YOU. IT IS SIMPLY A MATTER OF TRUSTING YOUR INSTINCTS AND DOING WHAT YOU BELIEVE IS RIGHT. HOWEVER, WITH AGE COMES EXPERIENCE. SOMEDAY, WHEN YOU ARE OLD, I KNOW YOUR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN WILL LOOK TO YOU THE SAME WAY YOU AND YOUR COUSINS HAVE LOOKED TO ME.

MUCH OF YOUR TRAINING HAS BEEN ON HOW TO IGNORE AND SUPPRESS CERTAIN THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS, AND FOR GOOD REASON. YOU MUST MAINTAIN YOUR GRIP ON REALITY. BUT THIS IS SIMPLE, WHICH IS WHY I TAUGHT YOU THIS WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG. NOW YOU MUST DO WHAT IS MORE DIFFICULT, AND LEARN WHEN TO LISTEN WHEN THE RIGHT VOICE SPEAKS.

AND PLEASE, JOHN, DO NOT BE TOO HARD ON YOURSELF. I HAVE HEARD TALES OF ALL YOU HAVE DONE, OF DEFEATING DRAGONS AND VAMPIRES AND BANDITS, MAKING THE PROVENCE A SAFER PLACE FOR ALL. YOU ARE PROGRESSING CLEARLY TOWARDS YOUR DESTINY, WHEN YOU WILL BE FIGHTING FOR THE FATE OF THE WORLD.

YOU HAVE TRULY EMBRACED THE EGBERT NAME AND LEGACY. I AM SO, SO PROUD OF YOU.

I LOOK FORWARD TO THE DAY YOU RETURN AND I GET TO MEET KARKAT. I'LL BE SURE TO HAVE PLENTY OF SWEETROLLS READY FOR YOU.

DAD

John is crying. Why is John crying? Was there something bad in there? Did someone die? You know his dad and uncle are both really old so what if-

"Are you okay?" You ask. Dammit, Karkat, that's a stupid question. No one's okay when they cry. And for John to cry it has to be something major and he-

He's smiling. He carefully folds the letter back up and places it on the bedside table. "Better than I've been in a while. Dad wants to make us sweetrolls, by the way." He sniffs.

"Huh, we'll have to see if they're as good as you say." You place a hand on his cheek and thumb away the tears.

"Man, they're better. My dad is the best at baking."

"We'll see about that."

"What? Are you gonna like have a bake-off with my dad?"
"Oh fuck no. I can't even make fucking cake."

"Then shush." He presses up against you.

You guess whatever was in that letter probably wasn't so bad after all.

---

**Anonymous said:**

During an argument with Karkat, John accidentally slips up and uses the wrong kind of shouting.

---

KARKAT: LOOK, JOHN, I'M NOT ASKING MUCH. JUST FUCKING SELL SOME OF THE SHIT YOU KEEP CARRYING.

john: no! a lot of this might come in really handy!

KARKAT: LIKE ALL THAT IRON ORE?

john: i’m gonna get that transmute spell soon!

KARKAT: UH-HUH, AND ALL THAT SALMON?

john: look, i’m gonna dry it, and then we’ll have rations when we need them

KARKAT: UH HUH, AND THE SKULL?

john: it’s cool!

KARKAT: SURE IT IS, LET ME SEE YOUR PACK

john: no!

KARKAT: YES.

john: Hey! Let go of that!

KARKAT: NO *tips it upside down*

john: WULD you just-

KARKAT: JOHN, DID YOU JUST ACCIDENTALLY SHOUT INTO THE WALL?

john: …no. can you get me a handkerchief? my nose is bleeding.

---

Tonight is it. Well, nearly. Tomorrow's the fifteenth, the day of the party. And, well, you’re scared. You probably shouldn’t be. You’ve fought dragons without magic or big weapons and won. You’ve stormed covens of vampires and necromancers and bandits so why the fuck are the Thalmor so different?

Why probably doesn’t matter. But it is. It’s different and it’s scary and you can tell John feels the same way. He’s having as much trouble eating as you are.
Eventually you just give up. You stand, shove your chair back under the table, and head upstairs. You sink into the bed and bury your head in your hands. The fuck is wrong with you? Behind you, the door opens.

“Karkat?” John asks timidly.

Deep breath. “Hi, John.”

He plops down beside you and throws an arm over your shoulder. You close your eyes and lean against him. “That’s a little better,” John says, “but you still feel tense.”

“Please. Like you're not.”

He grins. “Yeah, okay, but that doesn’t mean I can’t want you to be happy.”

“God, you’re such an idiot,” You say with a sigh. “But you know? At least you’re my idiot.” You take his head in your hands and lean in for a kiss.

He kisses back eagerly. Now that you have your hands on his body, he is awfully tense, but he’s still holding you softly and sweetly. He’s trying to calm his own nerves, isn't he? Or at least make it look like he's relaxed about this. Either way he's failing.

Boy, John needs your help for everything doesn’t he? When you pull away from the kiss, it’s only to press your forehead against is. The two of you just sit like that for a moment. Your eyes are squeezed tight as you breathe his air and he breathes yours. He smells musky, spicy, and so fucking human. You wonder if he’s thinking the same sort of thing about you and suddenly start to feel a bit self-conscious about the last time you bathed. But whatever he does smell he seems to like it, because then his hand is in your chest and he’s gently pushing you down onto the bed.

You allow him to ease you back onto the sheets and then he clambers on top of you, kissing you again. Your fingers tangle in his short hair, holding him down. He’s pressing down against you, big and heavy and warm.

He pulls back to press his forehead against yours. "I love you," he whispers.

"I love you too." You slide your hands down to his back. He's starting to loosen up a little bit. Good. "How do you want to do this?"

"Donno," he says. "Just want you." His voice is doing that low rumbly sex thing but there's almost something plaintive and innocent about the way he says it and, oh Mara, that combination does things to you.

You tug his tunic up, but it gets caught on something on his belt. You start swearing at John's clothes, which makes him burst out laughing.

"Get off of me you useless dick-headed shitstain!"

"Hehe, here. I'll help."

He sits up and even though you literally fucking asked for it you're not really ready for the rush of cold air when he pulls away. He undoes his belt and banishes his glasses. Then he manages to get his shirt and his shift off at the same time and you're treated to the world's best view. John towers above you, big and strong and fucking gorgeous. You could just stare at him for days, with his well defined shoulders and chest and just that little bit of softness to him. And you get to have this. You run your hands down his sides, but instead of doing anything remotely sexy he lets out a
startled yelp.
"What?"

"Your hands are cold!" He whines.

"What do you want?" You snap now that the stupid sexy spell is broken. "It's Evening Star!"

He takes your hands in his and rubs them. Oh, that actually feels really nice. You can feel yourself blushing, but you don't really care. You sit up to kiss him again, and he lets out a little breathy sigh. He drops your hands in favor of undoing your belt. His fingers just ghost over your crotch as he undoes the knot, like you weren't fucking hard enough already. You go back to touching him, running your hands over his shoulders, back, chest, you don't even care.

But then he backs away. You start to ask him what's he's doing, to beg him to come back. But then he's fiddling with the lacing on his trousers and, oh yeah, that's probably a good idea. Except for he actually gets his undone and they fall to the floor and what exactly was going on again? You can't remember and you don't care. Because here's the thing about John: John is over six feet tall and built like a brick house and he's fucking proportional. It's not quite enough to be ridiculous or intimidating, but you're still more than a little jealous when you're not painfully turned on.

In that moment, though, all you can do is gawk. How is this your life? How in all the planes of existence did you wind up here?

"Karkat?" He asks nervously, "Are you okay?"

You shake your head to clear it, and then realize that maybe he'd take that the wrong way. "I'm fine. Just get your ass back over here."

"Okay." But instead of pinning you again he stretches out on his side, not touching you.

That's just not fair, so you shove your damn pants down and press yourself up next to him. You kick a little bit until the offending garment is loose and on the floor, and then it's just skin on skin. You somehow manage to wedge one of your legs between his and he instinctively rolls his hips, rubbing his cock over your thigh.

It's burning hot, and you need some of that pressure for yourself. You push back, getting a little bit of friction on his hips. John gasps and pulls you as close as he can. He's so warm…

Compared to the cold room, yeah sure, but there's more than that. You're the Dunmer. You're supposed to be the one with a fire inside of you, but John's fucking radiant. There's always so much light in his eyes, even his dark skin seems to glow with its soft gold undertones. He's like- like-

It doesn't come to you until a shaky exhale hits your shoulder, warm and damp. Of course color's not a good metaphor. He's not fire, not the sun. He's the warm southern breeze, so gentle when he wants to be, but so strong when he doesn't. Yeah, yeah, you think to yourself as your body shudders. That'll work.

That's the last solid thought you have. Everything else is feelings, wanting to sink into him and never leave, wishing he could completely surround you somehow so that everything is just warmth and comfort and affection. All that matters is the kissing, the pressing together, his hands running all over your body and yours on his, his little breathy gasps and moans, the slight taste of mead and rosemary and the scent of sex.

There's a tension inside of you, coiling tighter and tighter and it's almost painful but so damn good

Then it snaps. You go stiff as your orgasm rocks through you, and then you collapse. You feel like you could actually melt down into the mattress, but somehow John still manages to get a little bit of friction against you. A little too much friction, actually. The movement isn't doing your poor oversensitive dick any favors anymore. You shuffle up a bit further to give yourself some relief.

He's close. His eyes are squeezed shut and he's biting his lower lip, so it'll be any second now. You stroke his hair, his back. Praises fall from your mouth, some garbled combination of Cyrodillic and Dunmeri with grammar that's somewhere between the two and disgustingly wrong in both. Whatever, it's not like anything you're saying makes sense anyway and it's not like he seems to care.

Instead, his nails dig into your back. He clutches you like he's afraid you'll vanish as he takes in four little uneven gasps and his cum spills out onto you. His breathing slows and his grip relaxes as he takes his turn to be a little sated puddle. He turns his hazy blue eyes up at you and your heart stutters. You pull him closer into a sweet slow kiss. When he pulls away he giggles.

"What?" You ask.

"How come we always have the best sex the night before we're about to do something stupid and- or dangerous?"

"Thanks for the fucking reminder," you grumble, sitting up to get a cloth.

"Sorry."

You wipe your legs and groin clean and then toss him the cloth. "It's probably because we're fucking idiots."

"Pfft, probably."

He shuffles around enough to slip under the blanket. You just stand for a moment and save yourself like thirty seconds of struggling. The straw feels rough on your skin. You should probably have put a shift back on, but John reaches for you again. He tries to tuck your head under his chin and you let him, burying your face in the crook of his neck. He traces your spine and you leave little kisses all over his shoulder. The two of you lie there together until you fall asleep, feeling safe and warm cradled in John's arms.

When you get down to the stables the cart is waiting for you. You’ve already given Malborn your gear and you pray to all the divines and daedra it's in the embassy waiting. You’ll probably be fine without, but Karkat... Well, he’s not completely unarmed. He’s tucked one dagger in each boot and he still has his amulet. You’ve enchanted both of your clothes so you at least have something, but it’s nowhere near as good as your normal stuff. Well, actually since your armor is currently a useless melted pile of steel, maybe this is better.

“Well boys,” Delphine says. "Are you ready?"

“Ready as we’re gonna be,” Karkat replies.

“I just hope you can play the part well enough.”

You shrug, “Not like there’s really a part to play.”
“Hey, not all of us are used to this formal bullshit.” Karkat points out.

Delphine sighs "Just remember, find out what information you can. I just know there’s a link between the Thalmor and the dragons. Find out what it is and come back, and I will give you every scrap of information I have."

"Any idea where this stuff will be?" you ask. “It might be a little weird for party guests to be snooping through too many of the back rooms."

“That would be a question for Malborn. Ask him once you get there. Oh, and good luck.” With that she turns and heads into the farmhouse.

You and Karkat enter the wagon and prepare yourselves.

You shift uncomfortably in your chair. What the flying fuck are you doing here? John’s a goddamn human and he fits right in, smiling politely and laughing at bad jokes. It’s like looking at a completely different person. He’s holding himself taller, looking broader. His movements seem more controlled, less wide and random. His imperial accent is flawless. If you had any doubts he’d blend in perfectly in any court in Tamriel they’ve been well and truly dashed.

In contrast, you feel like a skeever surrounded by prized pet rabbits. You don’t belong and soon the guards are going to notice. The best you can do is sit with the other drunkards and try not to have too much ale so that when the shit flies you’re ready. The bit of drink helps to soothe your nerves, but not enough.

Then Malborn motions to you. You barely hold back a sigh of relief. Finally, a way out of this. You head over to the bar and pretend to order another pint.

“It’s time,” he whispers.

“What do you want me to do?”

“When no one is looking…” he hands you a key. “Slide through behind me. Get your things. There’s a chest once you take two lefts.”

“But where are we heading?”

“If you head through the kitchen door you'll reach a back building. Get in there and go below ground. That's where they keep their information. Try to come back, but run if anyone sees you. I'll tell John where you're heading.”

"Okay."

Malborn gives a dramatic sigh and speaks in his normal voice. "Alright, alright, you can have one more, but none after that. I’ve got my orders not to let anyone drink too much.”

You don’t get too far away from the bar after that. Not much later, one of the nobles is telling a story that has even the guards captivated. You take your chance and slip into the kitchen.

You’re sitting with everyone else, listening to Skajl Frost-Fist finish his "interesting" tale of how he defeated a frost troll with a club made of ice, when a guard comes in. She rubs her hands nervously and barely manages to keep from running to her superior. She whispers something, and the other thalmor’s eyes go wide. The other elf whispers something back and she speeds back
where she came from.

You excuse yourself to use the privy, but as soon as you get around the corner and out of the guard's sight you cast invisibility. You're not sure what's going on, but you bet it involves Karkat, so you'd better find him fast. You just hope you beat the Thalmor to it.

Karkat was supposed to be the one to sneak around and get the information. Malborn told you where he was heading the last time you went to get a drink, but even if he hadn't you'd probably be able to find your way. All you have to do is follow the Thalmor.

You manage to slip in the door behind the last one

“For the last time,” a guard demanded, “Who sent you?!”

“You think you're going to get me to talk? You hit like a two-legged goat with the droops. Seriously, I've been more shocked by twists in hundred year old pulp fiction than you.” Gods, that's him. You're already late.

“Fine, be that way.”

You can’t see your partner from this angle, but flashes of blue light are reflected on the ceiling and you hear the zaps. Karkat screams and you're filled with resolve.. You're gonna protect him if it's the last thing you do.

You summon a flame atronach in the air above the small group of soldiers. In their moment of distraction you're able to shoot off a bit of chaos magic. Two guards catch on fire, one explodes into ghostly remains, and another is transformed into a pile of cheese. But now the remainder of them know you're there. You cast ironflesh on yourself and summon Vrillyhoo. With a shout that sends bodies flying, you leap onto the nearest guard. While you're busy with him the other three run, the flames just dying down on one of them.

“Well damn.” Karkat says, blinking. He kneels in a cell, arms suspended above his head. His clothes, the same he had on in the party, are torn and scorched. They must have thrown him straight in there.

“Are you okay?” You ask, rushing to his side.

“Been better,” he admits.

“What happened?” You work on undoing his shackles, but your hands are shaking making it hard to pick the lock.

“There was another prisoner in here, said his name was Etienne. I knocked out one guard and let him go, but there was someone else upstairs. He managed to get the jump on me and then he called for reinforcements. Ah-” the lock finally pops open and Karkat rubs his wrists. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. How long were you tied up?”

“Probably only about five minutes.”

“That’s five minutes longer than you should be kept like that.”

“By anyone except you, right?” He responds with a smirk.

“Oh, come on. Let’s get out of here.”
“There’s a trapdoor over there. That’s how Etienne got out. My stuff’s on that table though.”

You let him get up and go past you to shove the few weapons he had smuggled up into a sac. Then he stops at a chest and opens it.

“What’s that?”

“Dossiers.” He straightens up holding several small books. “We did all this shit, might as well take what we came for.”

You hear a commotion upstairs: heavy footfalls, like a small group of men in armored boots. Karkat snatches your arm and drags you down the trapdoor.

tirdas 16th evening star, 4e201

we made it in and out of the thalmor embassy in one piece. karkat got captured, but we managed to get him out before he got too hurt. more of them were coming after us, but we managed to escape through a trapdoor. that lead us into this cave. it’s freezing and there was a cave troll, but we were pissed off enough that he wasn’t much of a big deal.

we’re going to camp out here for tonight the weather is way too bad for

thalmor coming. stendarr help us.

The first thing you realize is that you’re in bed. Your mattress is down, softer than most of the beds in Skyrim. When you open your eyes you see high vaulted ceilings made of grey stone. For a moment you think you're home and the last few months were nothing but a dream.

Then Karkat stirs next to you. His eyes blink open slowly. Then you see something click in his brain and he sits bolt upright.

“Ah, so you’re finally awake.”

In the middle of the room sits a dark elf, calmly reading a book.

“This someone you know?” You ask Karkat.

He shakes his head in reply.

“I would say not.” the dark elf turns toward you, eyes glowing orange. “I tend not to interfere much with mortals anymore.” He smiles, showing off his fangs.

“So why the everliving fuck are we still alive? You’re a vampire. Usually they try to kill us and the last thing I remember John and I were huddled up together waiting to freeze to death or for the Thalmor to catch us.”

“Trust me, it wasn’t my idea to go out and fetch you. It was the will of the Queen. She told us exactly when and where you would be, and we brought you back. Even healed your wounds and made sure you were warm enough.”

“But why?” You ask, "What’s the catch?”

“The catch is that Nirn needs the two of you alive. Her Majesty has even better reason to want the world to continue than many others."
"Are we gonna get to meet this queen?" You ask. "We heard of her before, but it was really annoyingly cryptic."

"Yes, that is often the way with her, I'm afraid. But she is not here. Her other castle has gotten more and more of her attention since- Well, that is not my story to tell. Now we should likely take you back to Skyrim quickly. For there’s much to do and, well, let’s just say I think it’s unlikely you’ll find our food appetizing."

You feel Karkat shimmy a little closer to you. But hey, if they wanted you dead you’d be drained of blood by now. So you figure it'll probably be okay.

FREDAS, 19TH EVENING STAR 4E201

WE MADE IT BACK TO SOLITUDE TODAY. APPARENTLY THE VAMPIRES NORMALLY ONLY TAKE THE BOATS TO ICEWATTER JETTY, BUT BECAUSE OF THE WEATHER WE GOT AN EXPRESS RIDE TO SOLITUDE’S DOCKS. TURNS OUT WE WERE ABLE TO CATCH SOME FISH, SO THAT’S SOMETHING. ESPECIALLY SINCE IT TOOK US TWO DAYS NIGHTS TO GET BACK. FOR A WHILE I WAS ALMOST AFRAID WE’D STARVE TO DEATH AFTER THEY WENT TO ALL THAT TROUBLE.

APPARENTLY THE LAST CARRIAGE BEFORE THE NEW YEAR LEFT TODAY. WE’RE GOING TO BE STUCK HERE UNTIL AT LEAST THE SECOND, IF THE ONE WHO LEFT FOR MARKARTH COMES STRAIGHT BACK UP.

IT’S ABOUT MIDNIGHT AND WE JUST GOT A ROOM AT THE INN. JOTTING THIS ALL DOWN BECAUSE I DIDN’T WRITE ON THE BOAT, BUT THAT’S GOOD ENOUGH FOR NOW.

I SHOULD PROBABLY GO. JOHN WANTS TO SNUGGLE.

turdas 25th evening star, 4e201

so apparently some people aren’t happy with the whole dragonborn thing. when i was wandering around today, i was attacked by these guys wearing masks. at they asked me if i was dragonborn, and i said yes. at first i thought they were just celebrating the new life festival, but then they pulled out weapons and magic and jumped me, saying my lies would die with me or something like that.

karkat was gone and i didn’t have my weapons or good robes so i was a little worried. there were only three of them, so i probably could have won, but it would have been tough. luckily, there were guards nearby who were able to help me. i searched them and found a note. they were ordered after me to keep me from getting to a place called Solstheim.

i’d never even heard of it before, never had seen anyone wearing masks like that before. but i think i might know who ordered that hit on me earlier.

the guards took me to castle dower to ask me some questions about it. they said they’d see what they could do. while i was waiting, a courier came over with a letter from falk firebeard. apparently potema escaped the binding thing, and her ghost is out there somewhere.

i hope when i finally get to go home karkat will have some good news.

TURDAS 25TH EVENING STAR, 4E201
I FINALLY WENT OFF TO TRY TO DEAL WITH DUALSCAR. HE DIDN’T WANT TO TELL ME ANYTHING TO BEGIN WITH, SO I HAD TO TAIL HIM FOR A WHILE. I FOLLOWED THAT ASSHOLE ALL THROUGH A WAREHOUSE AND INTO THIS WEIRD NATURAL COVE THING BEFORE I FINALLY CORNERED HIM.

I WAS JUST GOING TO HARASS HIM A LITTLE MORE, BUT HE LOOKED LEGITIMATELY SCARED. MAYBE HE HEARD THE STORIES OF WHAT HAPPENED IN WINDHELM.

HE TOLD ME THAT HE WAS PAID OFF BY SOME PERSON NAMED KARLIAH? I’D NEVER HEARD OF HER BEFORE. BUT HE TOLD ME TO TELL MINDFANG SHE WAS GOING “WHERE THE END BEGAN.” AND THAT HE WAS WORTH MORE ALIVE THAN DEAD. I LEFT AFTER THAT.

I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THAT MEANS. BUT I GUESS I’LL WRITE A LETTER TO VRISKA TONIGHT, SINCE I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT HER MOM’S REAL NAME IS. BUT WHATEVER, I THINK WE’RE DONE HERE.

HOPEFULLY JOHN AT LEAST HAD A GOOD DAY OFF.

The door slams open and you awaken with a start. Your plan was to wait for John to get back to the inn, but you must have dozed off without him. Well there he is. He’s in the doorway, absolutely covered in snow.

“John? What-”

“We gotta go,” he says, quickly lighting a candle.

With the room as dark as it was before you couldn’t see much other than it was him, but now you see fear in his eyes, and how he worries at his lower lip with his teeth.

“Why? What time is it?”

“Late, but that doesn’t matter. Potema escaped. Her ghost is in the catacombs. We’ve gotta get her”

“What? Why? Shouldn’t the guards be doing it?”

“I stopped by the hall of the dead on my way back from the castle today. Apparently since we were there, the two of us have some sort of connection to her. I don’t get the details, but I know it’s up to us now.”

“Ugh, if we have to.”

“Karkat, she nearly caused the collapse of the empire 500 years ago. Yes we have to.”

“Okay, okay, I’m up.” You throw the blankets off and drag yourself over to the chest.

You should probably just be thankful you got a nap in.

You get dressed quickly and leave the inn, doing your best to keep under cover on the way up to Castle Dour. Finally, you make it to the Temple of the Divines. A Nord priestess startles when you enter.

“What are you strangers doing here? It’s the middle of the night.”
“We were sent to investigate the break in the wall,” John says.

“And it couldn’t wait until morning?” the priestess demands.

"Apparently not," you grumble.

"Orders from Thane Firebeard," John says, holding out a letter.

She reads it, sighs, and rolls her eyes. “Just be glad we keep twenty-four hour vigil. Follow me.”

She leads you into a side hallway and down some steps. Behind an old iron gate, you see what John meant by “the break.” In your opinion it’s more like “the huge fucking gaping hole you could fit a fucking mammoth through,” but that’s just you.

“What the fuck is that?”

The Nord gives you a dirty look, probably for daring to swear in a sacred fucking site, and unlocks the gate. “There you go. Good luck. I’m locking this behind you, so if you return and must be let out, yell.”

“Thanks for the help,” John says cheerfully.

He walks through and you follow, giving the Nord girl one last look as she locks the two of you inside.

Objectively speaking, this isn’t so bad yet. It’s webby and dusty, but the ceilings look solid enough and the smell of death isn’t as present as it is in most of the other nordic ruins. And yet, something just isn’t right. You’re not as magically attuned to things as John, but you can’t shake this feeling of… fear maybe? Something in your chest feels tight and heavy and cold, and while it doesn’t feel exactly like you’re being watched, there’s an oppressive presence that makes the air seem thick somehow.

“So you arrive at last.” Potema’s voice comes from everywhere and nowhere. Ahead of you, her image has been carved into the stone wall. Though it’s something to focus on, it’s not her. This entire place is her.

Suddenly the task of bringing her remains back to be sanctified seems impossible.

“Welcome heroes. I have been waiting for you for some time. It seems in the intervening months you’ve lost my book, more’s the pity. Still, though. You’ve more than earned a reward for freeing me of that binding.” Suddenly, the cold thickness of the air goes through you, finds that tightness in your chest. It’s even heavier now. “There. Now your mark is complete. When you die, the two of you will take your places by my side. Forever. Join me, children.”

John looks at you, eyes wide. “Well,” he says, "No turning back now."

“I guess not." You swallow. "Let's do this, then."

He nods and begins leading you deeper into the cavern.

Another weird thing about this dungeon: all of the monsters are just letting you pass. Many of the draugr have eyes glowing with life, and yet they stay still or continue their rounds as though the two of you aren’t even present. There are vampires now and then as well, and some of them give you smug grins, but none of them lift a hand.
You get it. The two of you are fucking cattle on your way to slaughter. With every step, that grip on your chest squeezes tighter and tighter. Finally, you make it to a large open space, filled with upright coffins. In the center of the room sits a glowing blue sphere, eerily similar to the Augur of Dunlain.

“Well done, heroes. Now it is time to meet the rest of my inner council. They’ll make this quick and painless. Well, *mostly* quick and painless.”

The coffins open, and out of each steps a draugr wearing ancient armor and wielding ebony weapons.

Instinctively, you back up against John. The door you came through shuts with a clang, leaving you trapped and surrounded.

“Well, you okay?” John asks.

You take a deep breath. “With all this magic shit I’m totally out of my league. I have no idea what the fuck this place or this bitch is doing to us. But fighting? That I can do.”

“Heh. Well then, let’s.”

The two of you draw your weapons and leap apart

Fighting with John is a practiced dance by now, and these draugr are so damn slow that it’s easy to hit their weak points. John’s constant atronach summons don’t hurt either, taking out ones that are too far away for either sickles or hammers.

The big glowy ball of energy presents a bit more of a challenge, because every now and then it sends shocks of magical energy at you. They’re a lot harder to predict and nearly impossible to dodge. Luckily, you’re well enough stocked on potions to keep either of you from keeling over.

Finally, the last draugr falls with Dawnbreaker embedded in its neck. The blue light shrinks away. With a triumphant laugh, you lean down to pull your sickle out.

You hear the zap before you feel it. Your entire body spasms and you fall to the ground. For a moment, the room spins as you lay with your face against the flagstones. You hear John roar, but it sounds like he’s miles away.

Slowly order reasserts itself and you push yourself up. John is locked in combat with a ghost. It’s all magic, and light flashes as they just barely manage to ward against one another’s attacks. But hers are bigger, and he’s starting to get tired. He moves just a little bit slower, sloppier.

He needs help.

They’re so focused on each other and their wizard’s duel that she hasn’t noticed you yet. You stay low to the ground and sneak along the wall. When you’re behind her, you ready Dawnbreaker.

It transforms back into a sword and you stand, stabbing her where her heart would be. There’s a shock of fire and heat, which sends both you and John flying. He’s cushioned by the bodies of the fallen draugr but you’re thrown into the stone throne, and then a rock hits you in the stomach, knocking the wind out of you.

John staggers back to his feet, and drags himself towards the ghostly remains. He loots around, pulling a few things from the ectoplasmic sludge.
“Where’s- Oh, good job, Karkat!”

“You’re welcome,” you say, now that you’ve got some air back in your lungs.

“Oh yeah! That too! But you got the skull!”

You look down at your lap. Well, so you do. Apparently that wasn’t a rock. You take it in both hands, and you feel the cold heaviness leaving you. For moment, the circlet on the skull’s brow glows, but then it goes dim again.

“John! Come touch this!”

“Ew, what?”

“Just do it!”

You stand and walk over to him. When he takes the skull his face goes lax for a moment. Then he starts smiling.

“Better?” You ask.

“So much better.”

He throws his arms around you and kisses you passionately. For a moment your body goes limp and the two of you almost collapse. Luckily, your legs manage to remember how to stand.

“You’re not gonna try to fuck me in here, are you?” You ask, only half-joking.

“N-no! Of course not. Maybe when we get back though. We’ll see what happens when the rush dies off.”

A tingle goes up your spine, and it probably doesn’t have anything to do with all of the zapping. Probably.

____________

tirdas 30th evening star, 4e201

it would have been too late when we got back to solitude last night, so we had to wait to go back to the castle until this morning. we told firebeard that we’d given the skull to styrr to purify and he gave us a metric shitton of gold. so we went to the smith's shop, and not only am i getting armor, but it just so happens that he had a set of ebony armor some other adventurers dragged in. it's not quite my size, but it's close, and he can alter the pieces that need it and give it to me for relatively cheap. like less than half what a custom set would cost. it's still more than steel plate would be, but not by that much. plus, that'll be done in time for us to get the first carriage out of here, but that won't be for a couple of days. but until that we’re going to just relax. i'm excited to see what kind of things the nords like to do for the new life festival!

jarl elisif gave us another quest on the way out. apparently she wants us to leave this horn at a shrine to talos on the way back to whiterun for her dead husband. it’s a little ironic, i think. this whole war is really being fought over talos worship, and here the jarl of the empire’s capitol is leaving an offering to him.

i guess the world’s like that sometimes.

____________

morndas 5th morning star, 4e202
made it back to whiterun today! i haven’t been writing because not much really happened in the trip back down. the wolves were kind of a concern, but we didn’t see any dragons or even sabercats.

it’s still snowy here, but there’s a lot less of it than in solitude. shadowmere was still waiting for us in the stables, and seemed happy to get some carrots and apples. lydia made us a hot dinner and we’ll be sleeping in our own bed tonight.

tomorrow we head out for riverwood. delphine will want to hear what’s going on.

Whiterun is beautiful in the winter. it reminds you a lot of home, to tell the truth. Perhaps the snow is a bit deeper, but it lacks the harsh winds of the north. Enough of the rocky terrain is visible that the glare off the snow isn’t too bad, and most of the river moves strongly enough that it hasn’t quite frozen over. You follow it closely, because Karkat says snow can be really perilous on top of the ridges, and if a storm comes it’s a much less safe place to camp.

Even with the less-direct route it only takes a few hours to reach Riverwood. You leave Shadowmere with some of the guards and head into the inn. Orgnar says Delphine is waiting for you “in the usual spot.”

Karkat looks at you in confusion, but you take his hand and lead him to the room on the right and close the door behind you.

“John? What’s-”

You press a finger to your lips and lead him over to the wardrobe. He watches quietly, if a bit confused, as you throw open the doors and move aside the heavy cloaks and a spare broom. It’s only when you pull the false back out that he nods in understanding.

When you lead him down, he unquestioningly follows.

“So you’ve returned,” Delphine says. “What did you find out?”

“The Thalmor don’t know anything about the dragons,” you reply, placing the dossiers on the table.

“What? You must be joking.”

“Look, if you’re not gonna believe us, why’d you send us out there?” Karkat demands.

“No, I do believe you. I’m just shocked.”

“Actually, irony of all ironies,” Karkat continues, “They apparently think you guys are the cause of it. They’re looking for some asshole named Esbern. Know anything about it?”

She visibly startles. “Esbern? He’s alive?”

“Well, that or the Thalmor have some really outdated info. So who is this guy?”

“He was- or I suppose is the archivist for the blades. He knows more about dragon lore than anyone else alive. If there’s anyone who’ll give us our answers, it’ll be him. Did the Thalmor have any idea where to find him?”

“Riften,” you say. “They think he’s hiding in the ratway.”
“It won’t be easy to convince him to come with you. Just ask him where he was on the 30th of Frostfall. He’ll know what you mean.”

“So you really think this will work?” Karkat asks.

“If you have a better idea, I’d love to hear it,” Delphine replies coldly.

“We’ll head out tomorrow,” you say.

“Thank you, boys. You can have the first room on the left. Tonight’s free.”

“Thanks, Delphine.”

"For the sake of Skyrim," she says, "It's the least I can do."

---

john: oh, a whole bunch! i’ve got a detect life force, disarm, become ethereal, one that makes me attack faster, a freeze, one to weaken enemies, one to summon storms, and of course i’ve got my knock people over and go fast.

KARKAT: AND WHAT DOES HE USE? THE ONE TO MAKE ANIMALS FRIENDLY SO HE CAN PET THE FOXES.

john: they’re fluffy.

---

catflowerqueen said:

I don't know if you've answered this already, but what's your favorite type of food? If I ever visited Skyrim, is there anything in particular that you would recommend for me to eat?

john: i’ve got a soft spot for the sweet rolls they have around here in whiterun. they use a honey glaze instead of one made from snow berries, so it tastes a little more like home. kind of reminds me of my dad’s baking sometimes!

KARKAT: REAL HORKER STEW FOR A SIMILAR REASON. YOU CAN SUBSTITUTE BEEF OR EVEN VENISON IN A PINCH, BUT IT JUST ISN’T THE SAME. I THINK THE BLUBBER DOES SOMETHING TO THE FLAVOR.

john: but yeah, my advice for people visiting is to be open-minded! the people here can be a bit… creative since historically food has been kinda scarce. just don’t eat the mammoth cheese. it can and will make you sick.
KARKAT: JUST THE STUFF THE GIANTS MAKE! IF IT’S BEEN MADE IN A CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT I’VE HEARD THAT-

john: sure. let me just get my friendly pet mammoth and try to milk it. that has to end well.

KARKAT: BLOODY IMPERIALS. THINK CYRODIIL IS THE CENTER OF TAMRIEL DON’T YOU?

john: looked at a map lately? :p
It's that time again, folks!
Slowly but steadily getting this stuff up. As of right now we're half way through the word document!!!

The trip to Riften was fairly uneventful, if stupidly long. It took you almost a week because of the weather. It snowed pretty hard a couple of days, so you had to stay in Ivarstead, and the rest of the trip was slow because first you had to plow through snow drifts and then you had to find caves or buildings or some other sheltered place to set up camp. As you go further east it gets warmer and warmer, and the river goes from partially to completely melted. The snow thins until there are actually patches of brown grass sticking out in places.

You barely take two steps into the city when Vriska stops you. She’s looks… scared. It doesn't really suit her.

“You’ve gotta talk to my mom,” she says. “It’s important.”

You look at Karkat. You weren't planning on doing more guild stuff, but… He just shrugs, and you figure that's about as good as you're gonna get.

You follow Vriska through the city. She takes you through the graveyard and into a mausoleum.

"What are you-?" Karkat asks.

But before he can finish, she presses in the diamond symbol on the coffin and the floor slides back, revealing a staircase and door beneath.

"Normally we don't show this to our lower level recruits," She says, leading you down the stairs, "But this is an emergency. Mindfang has a special job for you."

"What is it?" You ask.

She opens the door. "Ask her yourself."

You find yourselves at the back of the cistern. Just to your right is Mindfang's massive desk. She sits behind it, holding several eight-sided sapphires in her hand and staring down at a piece of parchment.

“So you boys finally made it back,” she says. “I assumed that as soon as I got your letter you’d be on your way.”

“Sorry,” John says. "We went as fast as we could, but first we had to-"

“Well you ought to have gone faster.” Mindfang snaps. “Karliah’s no joke.”
"How were we supposed to know that?" Karkat demands. "It's not like anyone told us."

"What, you haven't figured it out yet?" Vriska smirks at you.

"Hush!" Mindfang glares at her daughter before looking back at the two of you. "Karliyah was once a member of this guild. Somewhat like you, but much, much higher ranked. We did everything together, but then she betrayed us, murdered our former master."

"Why?" you ask.

"The reason for her betrayal is a mystery. Power? Gold? Either would be reasonable knowing her." She sits behind her desk and looks straight at you, her eye sharper than any knife. "After that, she disappeared. And now she has turned her attention to me. Obviously, she knows that if she kills me no one would be able to catch her."

"But what do we do?" Vriska asks.

"You don't need to do anything, my dear. The boys and I are doing what she said, going to where the end began, Snow Veil Sanctum."

"But Mindfang," Vriska starts, "I could help you! I've been itching to try out that new sword we-"

"Vriska," She places her hand on her daughter's shoulder and smiles softly. "I need you here. I could never entrust the guild's safety to anyone else."

Vriska smiles back, "Okay."

"Now boys, I need you to meet me there on the twenty first of Sun's Dawn. Because of your delay, I'm not sure if she's still there now, but she will be on that day. She has to. It's the anniversary. Until then," She stands and turns away from the three of you. "You're dismissed."

Karkat opens his mouth to ask another question, but Mindfang just repeats herself.

"I said, you're dismissed."

You take him by the hand and pull him towards the ragged flagon. After all, you came here to try to find Esbern. Just because the guildmaster's mad at you doesn't mean you're giving up on your main objective.

"Hey Vekel," you say to the barkeep. "Do you know anything about a man named Esbern? He should be a nord in his seventies or eighties?"

"I mean, that description matches half of the nutters they throw down into the warrens. But Esbern..." he strokes his thin moustache. "I can't say I've heard that name, but I think I remember one old man that had his mind a little better together than most. He should be down there too, in a room at the very back that locks from the inside."

"Well," Karkat says. "Guess that'll have to do. Thanks."

"No problem. Just mind the skeevers down there. Bloody nasty little things."

"Can't be worse than sabercats," Karkat grumbles.

"Oh! And there were a couple elves wanted to get back there before. Wouldn't say what they wanted, but they were awfully rude."
"What did they look like?" You ask.

"Well high elves, so damned yellow. They wore all black, but their clothes had little gold accents."

"Thalmor," Karkat says. "Do you think they found us or-?"

"No, I think they found him."

Karkat nods solemnly. "Let's go."

He heads behind the bar and opens the door leading down to the warrens. You brace yourself and follow. You’ve been back in there before, but Namira does it stink. And to make it worse, that’s where the city guard ends up putting the people who they don’t want to deal with. Usually because there's something wrong with them. And, of course, being trapped in a wet, dark, stinky place does no favors for anyone’s mental health. You don't particularly like thinking about it.

As soon as you enter you hear a man speak in the dark, dry accent of the Summerset Isles. They're close, but they don't know you're here. Thankfully you're still in your travelling clothes, so you move almost as quietly as Karkat does.

You see them as soon as you get into the first chamber, but they're talking to each other. You look at Karkat with concern. You've beaten more of them, but you don't want to fight if you don't have to. Karkat nods and silently draws his bow.

He takes two arrows from his quiver and then it's almost too quick to see, but a second later both Thalmor stagger to the ground, one with an arrow in his back and the other with it in his neck.

"Wow," you say. "You've gotten a lot better than that."

"I'm gonna pretend that's a compliment," he grumbles.

"It is!"

You sneak through the tunnels with extra care, trying to stick to the drier places so your steps don’t splash. Karkat doesn’t even seem to look at the ground as he silently dispatches any elves that get in your way. You're absolutely ready in case any of them are able to respond, but they never do. So instead, you just stash the bodies in harder to notice places. No need for any of their buddies you’ve missed to be even more on guard.

Neither of you have ever made it this far back before (curiosity only drove you through the stench for so long), but when you see the solid steel door with four locks on it, you’re pretty confident you know who’s behind it.

You take the lead and knock sharply three times. A small panel comes open, and through the opening you see a pair of pale blue eyes surrounded by wrinkles.

“What exactly do you want?” Esbern asks, his voice rough with age.

“Delphine sent us.”

“What? She’s alive? I- Wait,” his eyes narrow, "can you prove it?"

“Stupid blades,” Karkat mutters, “always making us prove ourselves.”

You ignore him and say “She said to ask where you were the thirtieth of Frostfall.”
Esbern’s eyes widen. “Well damn, so it is her. Just give me a moment to open this door and then we can talk like civilized people.”

There’s clattering and clanking as he undoes whatever is on his side of the door. An unremarkable old man in common clothing stands before you. If he hadn’t been so well protected you’d be worried you had the wrong guy.

“Sit down, make yourself comfortable,” Esbern says. “I’ll pour you some tea.”

Karkat looks offended and slightly confused. “Do we really have time for—”

“At the end of all things, we might as well save time for what we enjoy.”

He hands you and Karkat each a cup of steaming liquid. You’ve had tea a couple of times, but it’s completely foreign to Karkat. He gives it a concerned sniff, and doesn’t drink until you take a sip. Bleh, it’s even more bitter than you remember, but it would be rude to not drink something so expensive. At least it helps cover the stench of the rest of the warrens.

“So…” Esbern sits across from the two of you with his own mug. “Delphine has kept up the fight, eh? Even after all this time. I’ve been telling her it was hopeless, you know. I told all of them years ago. And now I’ve been vindicated. Alduin has returned, and no one but a dragonborn can stop him. And we all know there hasn’t been a dragonborn in centuries.” He lets out a low chuckle and begins to take a long drought of tea.

“I’m a dragonborn, though,” you say.

Esbern’s eyes go wide and he gags on his drink. He coughs and smacks his chest a few times.

“What?”

“Yeah.” You rub the back of your head. “I’m a dragonborn.”

"Are you sure? Can you do it? The shouts, I mean."

You nod.

"By the nine, I never thought I'd live to see such a thing. You must show me!"

"I will, but it might not be the best time."

"Why not?" He asks.

"Thalmor agents are looking for you," Karkat says. "We got some of them, but there's got to be more."

He sighs, "Oh, I knew this day would come eventually. But, I didn't expect any good news to come as well."

He takes a long sip of tea and then contemplates the liquid for a moment. You and Karkat sit with baited breath. He's got to say yes. He just has to.

"Well, if Delphine thinks it's not time to give up, who am I to argue? Besides, if we have a dragonborn perhaps not all has been lost. Let’s finish our tea, and then bring me to Delphine. We have much work to do."

FREDAS 16TH MORNING STAR, 4E202
TODAY WE LEFT RIFTEN IN THE COVER OF NIGHT TO TRY TO KEEP ESBERN SAFE. IT WASN’T GOOD ENOUGH. WE WERE ATTACKED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CITY BY SOME RANDOM KAJIIT. LUCKILY, THE GUARDS WERE ABLE TO HELP US. THEY HAD TO KILL HER, THOUGH. SHE SHOULD HAVE JUST AGREED TO GO IN QUIETLY.

SHE HAD A NOTE ON HER BODY, WHICH SAID WE’D BE IN RIFTEN LOOKING FOR ESBERN. IT’S HARD TO SAY WHO SENT IT. EITHER IT’S THE CULTISTS AGAIN, OR THE THALMOR KNEW WE WERE COMING. EITHER WAY, I DON’T REALLY LIKE THE IDEA OF GOING ALONG THE MAIN ROADS.

NEITHER DOES JOHN, SO WE’RE GOING TO BE TAKING THE LONG WAY AROUND THIS TIME. EVEN IF IT’S A STUPID FUCKING IDEA. IT’S THE MIDDLE OF MORNING STAR. IT WON’T BE SPRING FOR OVER A MONTH EVEN IN THE LOWLANDS, AND IN THE MOUNTAINS…

WELL, I’VE HEARD FREEZING TO DEATH IS NICER THAN TORTURE. SO MOUNTAINS IT IS, I GUESS.

sundas 18th morning star, 4e202

made it to boulderfall cave today. we haven’t run into any more assassins, but i’m still worried. i mean, if the thalmor are actually chasing us they know how to find battlemages. i don’t know how much going out of the way is even going to help us. but if i bring that up karkat will probably start asking questions and i don’t wanna talk about that.

this route is driving me crazy. all the mountains mean it’s going to take another week to get back to riverwood at our current pace. on the main roads we would have been half way to iverstead by now. and, well, to be honest i’m kinda bored.

at least we have shelter over our heads tonight. yesterday all we had was a little rock outcropping, and it was freezing, even with all three of us crammed into our tiny tent. but better yesterday than tonight. i don’t like the look of the sky. it reminds me of the time we were trapped up north…

MORNDAS 19TH MORNING STAR, 4E202

LAST NIGHT JOHN MENTIONED SOME SHIT ABOUT THE WEATHER, AND IT LOOKS LIKE HE WAS RIGHT. HE ALWAYS SEEMS TO BE RIGHT WITH THESE THINGS. IT’S NOT FAIR. HE HASN’T LIVED IN SKYRIM FOR A YEAR YET! WHY DOES HE GET TO KNOW IT BETTER THAN ME? MAYBE THAT’S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GET TO SPEND YOUR WHOLE DAMN CHILDHOOD CONTEMPLATING CLOUDS OR WHATEVER.

WE WERE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MOUNTAIN RANGE WHEN THE STORM HIT. THERE WERE ABANDONED RUINS NEARBY, AND THEY WEREN’T GREAT COVER BUT IT MANAGED TO KEEP THE WORST OF THE WIND OUT.

I DON’T KNOW HOW LONG WE’LL BE STUCK HERE, BUT WE WON’T BE ABLE TO GO UP INTO THE MOUNTAINS AGAIN.

HOPEFULLY, THE WEATHER WILL BE ENOUGH TO KEEP THE THALMOR OFF. THEY SAY SUMMERSET’S WEATHER NEVER GETS ANYTHING LIKE THIS.
this isn’t good. we’ve been hopping from shelter to shelter, and at this rate i don’t know if we’ll make it to riverwood without running out of food. and i feel super gross. like i’m pretty sure if we don’t make it to town soon the thalmor will just be able to smell us.

everything looks the same to me so i can't even double check where we're going. i know karkat will be able to get us through, and we haven't been passing the same buildings twice but it's been over a week and we’re not even half way back yet, and even though we’re rationing…

it doesn’t help that the animals are all hiding out from the blizzards too. normally i'm pretty decent at hunting, but the snow just covers tracks so quickly that i can't do anything.

goddammit, now i know why karkat was so worried about going out like this in the winter.

Yep, you are going to be properly stuck today. The wind is howling and the snow is falling so hard you can't see more than twenty feet. And to make it worse, John's been brooding. That's never a good sign. He doesn't want to talk, and you just know he's blaming himself for this mess.

To be fair, it's not completely inaccurate. Maybe it's being holed up like this, but you kind of want to take his head off for deciding to go this early. But you can't. You have to hold this little team together. Besides, this dragonborn stuff is important. No one ever said it would be easy.

You sit around the fire, splitting up the last sweetroll for breakfast.

"This is all we have?" John asks.

"It'll be fine," you snap. "Just because you've never missed a meal in your goddamn life doesn't mean normal people can't go without."

He closes his eyes and his face goes all stern. Shit, maybe you shouldn't have pushed him. Maybe someday maybe when you open your mouth you'll manage to avoid automatically inserting your foot, but you're cold and tired and hungry and today is not that day.

John stands and heads to the mouth of the cave.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?!!" You demand

"I'm going out."

"What?!"

"There has to be something nearby. We can't stay holed up like this. Who knows how long this snow will keep coming."

"John, wait! You'll freeze you fucking-"

He throws open the door and it's silent. No wind or snow comes in.

"What in the Tribunal's gilded chamber pots..." You get to the door. How the hell did it stop storming?

And, well, it didn't. The blizzard rages on except for in this little bubble around the doorway.

"How are you doing this?" you ask.
"I don't know," he says. "I've never done this before. I mean, summoning snowstorms and firestorms is a thing, but I've never managed to do it and..." He drifts off.

"Is this dragonborn stuff, then?"

"I don't know, it doesn't feel like it." He takes a deep breath. "But, okay, let's do this. Everyone out into the bubble!"

You and Esbern get close to John. As he starts moving the bubble moves with him. It's so surreal, seeing trees bending in the wind but feeling nothing. The air is still chilly, but without the wind it's doable. The bubble starts to waver, a little bit of wind and snow breaking through.

"Shit!" John says. He shuts his eyes and lifts his hands and you're protected again.

You have to lead him the rest of the way to Ivarstead. When you tell him you're in sight of the city he sighs and lets the spell drop. Then he collapses onto you.

"Shit! John? John!"

"No time for this," Esbern says. "We get him to the inn first, make sure we're all safe. Then you can try waking him up."

"Fine," you say.

Thank the gods for strength potions, but even with that you have to move kind of slow. Sometimes you wish your partner wasn't the massive wall of man he is. Then he usually wraps his arms around you and makes you feel warm and safe and small in the best way and you're willing to forgive it.

You hope he can do it this time.

You manage to drag him to the inn and throw him into an open bed. You pay the innkeeper for two rooms for the night, as well as a solid meal for you and Esbern. Objectively, the food's not that good, but it's fresh and you're starving.

Stupid John, making sure you eat and getting your body out of the habit of fasting. He'd want to make sure you had lunch before you checked up on him, you know it. Still, you feel a little bit selfish sitting there. The thick cream sauce on the chicken would make too much of a mess, but you take the bread with you when you head back to the room.

You set it on the bedside table and take a look at John. You're not sure if it's better or worse that he looks perfectly healthy. His color's normal, he's breathing like he does in the middle of the night. When you place your fingers to his neck his pulse feels fine. But he doesn't stir. He doesn't murmur, doesn't let out the occasional snore...

It has to be magical exhaustion. You know that's a thing that happens when mages push themselves too far. And normally they're fine. Normally they wake up a few hours later like nothing ever happened. But then other times... other times they drain themselves so badly that they never wake up again. They just sleep until they starve or dehydrate or whatever.

You wish you could give John a potion to make it better. And you have potions of magicka. You've got plenty of them, actually. John's been relying on magic, so you have to make sure he can do it. That's your fucking job. But that's an internal potion. There's nothing you can do if he's not awake enough to drink.

So for now, you just press yourself as close to him as possible, like just by being there he could
take some of the magic you've never learned to use. But you can't sleep. Not while he's like this.

Instead you pull out your journal and start to write. It ends up a horrible jumbled mess, filled with worry and sadness, but at least you have something down.

Then there's a little bit of motion next to you. John yawns and stretches.

"Morning," he says.

"John!" You turn over and squeeze him tightly.

"Hehe, hi to you too!" he strokes your hair. "How long was I out?"

"It doesn't matter," you say. "Just, for fuck's sake, don't do that again."

"Heh, did I scare you or something?" He pulls back and smiles his stupid buck-toothed smile, like he thinks that it's some kind of joke.

You scowl. "Of course not! I know it feeds into your hero complex and everything to pretend I'm some kind of pathetic damsel waiting for your return. But it's not like I was worried!" Your voice starts to get thick and you feel tears welling up. His face drops like a stone. "Why would you ever think that maybe I'd be terrified out of my goddamn skull that my boyfriend, the love of my stupid short life, seriously fucked himself up because he pulled some inexplicable magic shit and-"

"Fuck." He pulls you back to his chest. You hear his steady heartbeat, feel his big strong arms around you. You can't help the feeling of safety, the comfort and trust that always shows up when he holds you like this. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't joke about that. And I didn't mean to scare you."

You sniffle. "Apology accepted, asshole."

With your face buried in his torso, it's impossible to miss the incredibly annoyed growl his stomach lets out.

"Oh I see," you tease. "This wasn't about me or Esbern or saving the world. You just wanted dinner."

"Rude," he says, getting to his feet. "Besides, this is totally for you too. How long do you think my body'll stay like this if I don't eat?"

"Your magnanimousness knows no bounds," you grumble.

"I'll start acting serious when you do. Maybe. Anyway, you coming with?"

"Nah," you yawn. "Talking to you is exhausting. Just come snuggle me after you've stuffed yourself."

He laughs. "It's a date." He leans down to kiss you on the cheek and then goes out into the main hall, gently closing the door behind him.

The road from Ivarstead to Riverwood is small enough to be safe, since it's pretty far off the highway from Whiterun to Riften, and so even staying along the path you're relatively safe. It’s rare to cross more than one or two people a day, and with your faces covered in scarves and hoods they likely wouldn't recognize you anyway, so you're able to make it just before sunset the next day. Between the terrain, the speed, and the fact you all got to actually wash yourself properly and you and Karkat took the time to shave the trip is a lot more pleasant.
When you enter the Sleeping Giant, Delphine runs up to Esbern and takes his hands.

“It has been far too long, my friend,” He says.

“Same to you,” she replies. She turns to you, beaming widely. “Thank you so much for bringing him here safely!”

“No problem,” You say, ignoring Karkat’s look of “it absolutely was, let them know we worked our asses off!”

“Now there’s no time to lose. There’s much we can discuss. Follow me.”

Delphine leads the rest of you down into her secret room.

“I suppose you know of the current situation,” she says to Esbern.

“Oh yes, the signs were quite hard to ignore.”

“So, what are we going to do?”

“I do not know,” Esbern replies, “But I know where to find out.” he reaches into his bag and grabs a massive leather-bound tome.

“What is that?” Delphine asks.

“Though our libraries were burnt in the war, I managed to save a few things,” He places the book on the table and pages through it. “Sadly, these books do not contain all of Alduin’s history. However,” He pauses. Across one page is a sketch of a strange building with a roof that curved upwards at the edges. “It was all recorded on Alduin’s wall in Sky Haven Temple.”

“I take it that’s not a myth either,” Delphine says.

“As real as the dragons it holds the keys to defeating.” He turns to you. “The Temple is atop a mountain in the Reach. It’s been cut off for centuries, only accessible if its guardian traps are disarmed by a dragonborn,” he turns to you.

“But if it’s in the mountains…” Karkat says.

“That’s right, we won’t be able to make the trek until the thaw.”

“We don’t have time for that!” you yell.

“We also don’t have time for a dead dragonborn,” Delphine says, frowning. "It was foolhardy enough to bring Esbern here. You can't risk yourself like that again."

“The end will not quite come yet,” Esbern adds. “It’s been said it will be slow, an erosion of humanity before Alduin finally is able to consume the world. Until we can reach Sky Haven Temple, I believe the best thing to do would be to train. You and Karkat should hone your skills, get ready for the battles ahead.”

He’s wrong. You know he’s wrong. You open your mouth, about to say something, but then Karkat places a hand on your shoulder.

“He’s right, John. Look, we should let them do their blade thing. Let’s go upstairs and work out what we’re going to do next.”
“Karkat, I-”

He glances to the side, and gives you a wink that he probably thinks is sly.

You let out a dramatic sigh. “Well, we’d better be off then! Bye guys!” You lead Karkat upstairs.

“Damn kids,” Delphine mutters.

“Oh, let them have their fun.”

“You’re not the one who cleans the beds.”

You and Karkat exchange a look on the stairs. Wait do they seriously think you were going to—Whatever, you’ve got bigger things to deal with.

Karkat closes the door behind you with a click. You sit on the floor and watch as he rolls your map out onto the floor. “So traveling in the winter is gonna be shit, but I think we’ve pretty much proved we can do it if we’re careful. That means we probably won’t be able to go through the mountains or too far north, but if you can use those weather powers sparingly we should be able to keep from getting turned around. So, you ready to go be stupid?”


middas 28th morning star 4e202

finally made it back to whiterun today! we’ve been traveling pretty constantly for over a month, so karkat’s forcing me to hang out around here for a while so the two of us can rest. i hate to say it, but he’s probably right. besides, that way we can plan out the most efficient route so we can get as much stuff done as possible before the snow start melting, which might not be until rain’s hand. i’m planning to go around town the next few days, see if i can find some bounties or something. that reward from firebeard got us pretty far, but we're starting to run low on cash again, and lydia's gonna need a little more money to take care of herself after we leave.

TURDAS 29TH MORNING STAR, 4E202

FOR ALL THE WHINING JOHN DID ABOUT MANDATORY DAYS OFF, HE SLEPT ALMOST ALL OF TODAY. AS SOON AS HE WOKE UP HE GOT SO FUCKING FLUSTERED! HE THREW ON SOME CLOTHES AND MADE HIS WAY TO THE PUB. APPARENTLY IT WASN’T A TOTAL LOSS BECAUSE WHEN HE CAME BACK HE PROUDLY TOLD ME ABOUT HOW AMREN NEEDED SOMEONE TO FIND HIS FAMILY’S SWORD. WE’LL SEE IF HE COMES UP WITH ANYTHING ELSE.

IN THE MEANTIME, I’M GOING TO GO SPEND SOME TIME WITH NEPETA OR SOMETHING, MAYBE ORGANIZE OUR SUPPLIES WHILE JOHN’S NOT LOOKING SO WE CAN NOT BE CARRYING AROUND HALF OF THE TREASURE OF THE CRYPT OF LORD FUCk ALL WITH US.

It’s a gorgeous, clear day when you and Karkat leave Whiterun. You did manage to find a couple bounties that aren’t horrendously out of the way, but you do have to divert a little bit north. You don’t like it, it feels like a distraction, but you’ve got to make money somehow. Besides, dispersing bandits has to help the people at least a little bit.

“I don’t think we’re gonna make it tonight,” you say, looking up at the rapidly darkening sky.
“Probably not,” Karkat admits. “Where do you think we should set up camp?”

“Well,” you point off in the distance, “I see a barn over there.”

“Huh, You’re right.”

The two of you trudge towards the building. There’s no sign of a house nearby, and as you approach you notice some gaping holes in the roof and side of the building.

“Well,” you say, “at least now we don’t have to worry about if the farmers will let us sleep here.”

“Let’s just hope there’s not a massive skeever nest in there,” Karkat grumbles.

“One way to find out!”

You rush forward and the door opens with a painful creak. The rafters are covered in spider webs. Leaves scatter the ground and there’s a couple piles of snow under the holes in the roof and next to the ones on the side.

“Can we get some light?” Karkat asks.

You summon an orb of magelight and Karkat peeks around.

“Looks like there’s some normal mice, but not anything bigger,” you say, dropping your bag. “I think that this should probably-“

A man screams somewhere nearby. A few others cry out and then there are sounds of steel on steel and magic being fired off. You and Karkat bolt out of the barn as quickly as you can.

Just on the far side of the barn you see a dozen or so Stormcloaks fighting a handful of Thalmor. One of the Stormcloaks is already on the ground, his hair and fur armor still burning. You don’t even think. Yeah, you’ve been trying to stay out of the war, but it’s the Thalmor. You make a fireball and hit one of them in the back.

The elf lets out a cry and turns around to face you. She readies an ice bolt, but before she can one of the Stormcloaks bashes her head in with a mace. Blood and brains splatter the snow.

The others are luckier. They start running away from the Stormcloaks and towards the two of you. Karkat tips an arrow in poison and you summon an atronach. The Stormcloaks try to chase after them, but their armor’s heavier and slows them down more. In the meantime, the Thalmor are shooting you instead.

You barely manage to get a ward up in front of a fireball aimed at Karkat’s head, but the blast staggers you. Thankfully, Karkat stands his ground and manages to get an arrow in the thigh of the elf spewing lightning. The agent’s hands go dark. He pauses in confusion, which is just enough for one of the Stormcloaks to catch up and he gets pulled into a swordfight.

The remaining Thalmor scatter. Two of them focus on you while the other five try for the Stormcloaks, shooting them with fire from all angles. You try to hit one of the latter group with a few more fireballs, but then the other two are too close. Karkat drops his bow and goes for his sickles, closing the distance between himself and the Thalmor.

But then it’s two on one, and the Thalmor know it. You should help, you need to help, but now he’s in the way. You can’t keep hitting them from over here or you’d risk hitting him instead. So you shout yourself forward, warhammer in hand. Suddenly the fight’s a lot more even, but the
Thalmor are good, and they’ve got armor on and you don’t. One of the Thalmor tries to block with his sword, but you just batter it out of his hands. Karkat slits his throat. What is he- Oh, he already killed his.

You turn back to the other fight. A few more Thalmor are on the ground, but so are all but one of the Stormcloaks. And the Nords aren’t looking too good. But the Thalmor are distracted, advancing with their blades drawn. You hit one with a bolt of chaos magic, and he vanishes in a puff of smoke, leaving behind a pile of nails. The final Altmer glances over and sees the two of you. She sheaths her weapon and starts running towards the thicker part of the woods.

Good. Now that that’s taken care of you should probably see-

An arrow flies past your head, embedding itself in the elf’s back. She staggers a few more steps forward and then falls to the ground.

Karkat stands behind you, bow back in his hand.

“What the fuck, man?!” you demand. “She was running away!”

“Yeah, back to her boss to tell them where we are and what we’re doing.”

“It’s still not right!”

He puts his bow away with a sigh. “Look, John, if you wanna be an idiot and go off to die an honorable death or whatever fine, but wait until we kill Alduin. Now come on, let’s see if any of these guys are still alive.” He stalks off towards the spot where the Stormcloaks lie, slowly turning the snow red.

MORNDAS 2ND SUN’S DAWN, 4E202

RAN INTO SOME THALMOR ATTACKING STORMCLOAKS TODAY. JOHN FLIPPED HIS SHIT WHEN I KILLED ONE BEFORE SHE COULD ESCAPE. LIKE THEY WOULD HAVE GIVEN US THAT CHANCE IF THEY’D WON.

A COUPLE OF THE STORMCLOAKS SURVIVED. WE HEALED THEM UP AND THEY’RE SETTING UP NEAR US TONIGHT. THEY WERE HEADING WEST, PLANNING TO TAKE A LITTLE VILLAGE SOMEWHERE. BUT THEIR ENTIRE UNIT WAS WIPED OUT BY THE THALMOR. THEY’D BEEN STALKING THEM FOR DAYS, PICKING THEM OFF ONE BY ONE WHEN THEY WENT OFF INTO THE WOODS TO TAKE A SHIT.

THE STORMCLOAKS ARE STABLE, BUT I DON’T KNOW IF THEY’LL FULLY RECOVER. THEY’RE GONNA HEAD BACK TO WHITERUN, MAYBE DECIDE IF THEY WANNA GO BACK AND TRY TO KEEP FIGHTING OR DESERT.

JOHN’S BEEN REALLY WEIRDLY QUIET TONIGHT. GUH, HE’S THINKING AGAIN, ISN’T HE? I SHOULD PROBABLY TRY TO SNAP HIM OUT OF IT.

The wind is horrendous today. Or at least it is everywhere not immediately next to the two of you. After both of you both toppled over more than once, Karkat finally gave up and let you start blocking the wind. But it’s getting worse. Karkat doesn’t seem to notice, but you can feel it. You’re not going to say anything, of course, because then he’d make you stop, but you can still privately not like it.
Thankfully, you have a horse, so all you have to do is stay sitting in the saddle and focus on keeping your little bubble of calm going. Which is harder than it sounds, even if you have been practicing when Karkat wasn’t looking. And you're starting to get tired.

That’s probably why he sees it before you do.

“John?” He says.

“Karkat, I told you I have to pay attention to-

“No, John, look!”

You open your eyes. Against the backdrop of the grey sky you see something even darker, a long serpentine body swimming among the clouds. From one end of the creature a beam of multicolored light radiates, aimed directly at the ground.

“Alduin…” you whisper. “Shit, do you think we can do this?”

“I mean, according to the legends it can’t be time yet. We haven’t done any of the shit that the Dragonborn is supposed to and-“

You take Shadowmere’s reins from his hands so your fists have something to clench, and you coax the horse into a full gallop. “But we still have to try.”

“I was getting there eventually! But John?”

“Yeah?”

“If this all goes to shit, I love you.”

“I love you too. Even if it doesn’t, heh.”

You’re approaching Alduin fast, way too fast. You summon your hammer and get ironflesh going. You wish you could put on your armor but you’re not gonna have time and it’s buried in the saddle bags and-

“Alright, get ready.” Karkat says.

It’s hard to tell if he’s talking to you, the horse, or himself. But then you’re there and you don’t have time to worry about it anymore. Once you get close to Alduin, you realize that these harsh winds were circling around him, and here near the dragon burial ground the air is still. Well, that’s one less thing to worry about.

You pull back your arm and throw a firebolt directly at the monster, but it doesn’t connect. Suddenly he’s on the other side of the burial mound. One massive red eye focuses on you, the vertical pupil narrowing. Alduin closes his jaw, and the whirling light subsides. The ground begins to rumble as the dead dragon crawls its way back up to the surface.

“Again?” he hisses. "Stupid human. I am guessing your goal is to stop me, but it is futile. Here today you shall fail. And I shall kill you both.”

His eyes narrow and he opens his jaws again. He lets out a terrible shout, and before you can react, the horrific multi-colored light engulfs you. There’s a moment of heat a moment of pain and then-

Then you’re about fifty feet back, again being blown about by the storm. Alduin is blasting the ground again.
“What the fuck?” Karkat demands.

“He must have pushed us back somehow! Let’s go!”

As you push forward again, you ready a different blast, lightning this time. But again he dodges.

“What?” the dragon asks, glaring at you. “I know that I just- Never mind! Just fucking die!”

He blasts you again, and again you’re pushed back, but not as far. You feel the lightning crackling back in your hand. Alduin finishes shouting at the ground and then turns to you.

“Now that… that is rather odd.”

This time Karkat’s ready. He fires an arrow and it manages to connect with Alduin’s side. The dragon turns his head and pulls the arrow out like it was just a sliver. He spits it on the ground and chuckles darkly.

“You never change, do you Karkat? So predictable, so stupid.”

“How in the fuck do you know my name?”

“I’d like to say you won’t live long enough to find out but, well… I’m not sure what fuckery is going on right now, but any way you won’t stop me here, not now, not ever. Not in this reality, and not anywhere else!”

With a shout of unrelenting force, he pushes you back. But you have your spells ready, and you try to hit him with everything you’ve got. Again, he’s suddenly on your other side, and then he turns to soar above the clouds.

“What the fuck was that supposed to mean?” Karkat asks.

The dead dragon was begins to pull itself free from the ground, flesh beginning for form around the bones.

"Figure that out later, fight now!"

“Nahagliiv!” Alduin’s voice booms from above the clouds. “Flee if you can. The time is not right!”

The dragon spreads its boney wings as the leather begins to form between the fingers.

“No!” You shout, calling upon the wind to keep the dragon pinned.

As more and more of the dragon’s body forms, it thrashes its head around wildly, desperately attempting to get airborne. Karkat jumps from the horse and runs forward, slicing its wings to keep it earthbound. The dragon takes a deep breath and shouts at you. Shadowmere rears up, but you push him forward into a charge. You summon Vrillyhoo and leap up onto the dragon. Karkat keeps going at the wings, making sure the membranes are being torn before they can even properly form, keeping it earthbound. You do your part and slam the hammer down with all of your might at the dragon’s neck and head again and again and again. You don’t stop until you feel its body begin to burn beneath your feet.

Fuck that’s hot! With a yelp, you jump away, and beat the hem of your robe to make sure you're not on fire.

“Impressive,” Karkat says.
“Hey, fuck you!”

"You know I'm occasionally *not* sarcastic, right?"

"Oh." As the fire burns away behind you, the world starts to go a little fuzzy. No, dammit, not now.

“Yeah. Hey, if nothing else…” Karkat picks up a small bone. “We know this one won’t be hurting anybody.” He gives you a wry but reassuring smile.

“Heh, I guess not.” You close your eyes and hold your face in your hands. You feel empty and heavy and this is not gonna be good.

"Are you okay?"

You shake your head and fall to your knees.

“John? John!”

He’s shaking you, which makes it worse. Hey, the wind stopped and the clouds are gone. Such pretty, pretty moons. You think… you think maybe you'll sleep for a while.
Great, not again. You're starting to think your damn boyfriend has falling sickness. You kneel beside John, shaking him, shouting, doing everything you can to make him wake up. Yeah, it's better to just let him rest, but the two of you can't stay out here at night; it's still too cold. You're probably going to have to burn another strength potion, but you have to do something, have to get him somewhere. You passed some ruins a little while ago, maybe you can find shelter in the-

“Need some help there, man?”

You startle at the sudden voice. Someone's right next to you. How the fuck didn't you hear them coming? You tear your eyes away from John. Two hooded figures stand right behind you. One wears a black cloak, the other a dark crimson one. Their faces are mostly obstructed by shadow, but they're as pale as Secunda.

“Hey, you’re okay, you’re okay.” The man in black says, holding his hands out like he’s steadying a horse. He wasn't the first to address you, his voice is a lot lower. He turns back to his companion. “Hey, are we here to help, bro, or are we here to help?”

“Well, it’s probably a good idea,” the one in red replies. “What with the whole of this reality hanging in the balance thing.”

"Who the fuck are you guys anyway?” You snarl, getting to your feet. “I'm guessing if you wanted to kill us you already would have, but why the hell did you sneak up on us if you're going to be all friendly and what the hell is going on?!!”

“Aww, he doesn’t remember me,” the one in red says. “I’m almost offended, Karkat. I mean, well, I guess we only met once and it wasn’t even official. And I can be covert as hell.” He pulls his hood back.

Okay, you are absolutely certain you've never seen this guy before. Honestly, you're not even entirely sure he's a he. Stance is saying male, and the cut of his clothes is more masculine, but you've never seen a style quite like that. He's probably from some weird corner of Tamriel, that would explain the slight accent. As if his skin wasn't pale enough, his short hair is bone-white in spite of his youth. He's got a round, boyish face and a slightly upturned nose. But perhaps his most striking feature is his eyes, big and round and red as yours.

"Pretty sure I don't make a habit of hanging out with vampires," you say.

He snorts. “Yeah, keep telling yourself that. You can call me Dave. That’s my brother, Dirk.” He points his thumb in the direction of the other hooded figure. “Let’s get you guys to camp. Having a run in with big ugly would take a lot out of most folks, and your friend looks completely fucking out of it.”

Dirk lifts John and plops him across Shadowmere’s back. He gives the horse’s muzzle an affectionate stroke and presses his forehead against its nose. Well, that horse seems to have an uncanny ability to detect people who have it out for you so… Dirk begins to lead the horse westward.

“We camped out in the moldering ruins yesterday, Dave says. “We were planning on heading East tonight, but one extra night won’t un-kill us. That is, if you’re willing to get us up to speed with
what’s going on.”

“As soon as we get John inside and safe.”

“You two together?” Dirk asks.

“No, we just bumped into each other along the road and decided to fight a giant god-dragon together,” you reply sarcastically.

“Not like that, man. I mean are you together?”

You huff. “Not that it’s your business, but yes.”

Something you can’t quite place flashes across Dave’s eyes for a moment, but it’s gone before you’re even completely sure you saw it. “Noted,” he says.

Dirk seems to give him a look, but Dave just shakes his head.

“So, I wasn’t aware that a lot of you guys travelled,” you say. “Vampires, I mean. I thought covens usually stay in the same spot.”

“That’s because we do,” Dirk replies. “Hard to travel when you fry in the sun. We’re out on Royal Business.” You can hear the capitalization in his voice.

"Ugh, I'm guessing this is more cryptic vampire queen shit."

"Eh, something like that,"

"She order you to come save our asses again?"

Dave frowns a little. "As bossy as our sister gets, we prefer to think of it as a favor."

You stop. "Sister? You're related? Like actually related, or like weird blood oath stuff?"

Dave rolls his eyes. "Like we have the misfortune of sharing an asshole sperm donor."

"So what does that make you?"

"Traditionally they call us half-siblings. Are the kids still saying that these days?"

"Not like that! I mean, if she's queen…"

“Yep,” Dirk says. He gives a flourishing gesture, giving you a peek at his clothes. They’re about the same as Dave’s really, except his shirt is a dark amber color. “Vampire Kings of the Midlands at your service. We do festivals and huge ass battles and sometimes kids’ birthday parties if they’re late enough.”

“But what are you doing here?”

“Like he said,” Dave shrugs, “Royal Business. Knowing how these things work, you’ll probably get your little nose in our shit soon enough, but it doesn’t need to happen before it needs to happen.”

“Alright…” You say.

“Alright,” he replies.
Dirk lets out an affirmative grunt and Shadowmere whinnies. Well, that’s that, you guess. Fucking horse.

You reach a small outcropping of rock at the top of a hill.

“There’s nothing here.” You point out.

“Nope of course not.” Dave kneels down and traces a square on the rock. Suddenly, out of nowhere a wooden trap door appears. “Nothing at all.” He opens it and gestures for you to come inside. "We’ve clearly just led you hear to sacrifice you to the god we believe lives in that dead tree over there."

You glare at the sarcastic ass, but enter anyway. After all, it’s not like you have much of a choice.

It’s actually not half bad down here. It’s a lot warmer out of the wind, but you can't see much. You take a couple steps back from the ladder, and Dirk slides down. He sends a well-placed fireball into the darkness, and it lights the soot-covered hearth.

"Huh," you say, looking around the small space. "This isn't as bad as I thought it would be."

"Yeah, oddly enough most of us actually like our lairs covered in blood about as much as you'd like honey splattered everywhere." Dirk takes a seat on one of the stone sarcophagi and unfastens his cloak.

Dave jumps into the hole. Even though John is twice his size, the vampire is carrying him like it's nothing. He carries him past you and over to the-

"Wait, is that a bed?"

"Yep," Dave says.

"Why do you have a bed in here?"

"Uh, to sleep on? What do you normally use 'em for?"

"But the coffins…"

"Ain't comfortable, even when you're dead," Dirk says. "It's just they were here first and they're way too fucking heavy to move."

Dave sets John down and takes a seat next to his brother. You awkwardly slide onto a coffin just across from them, trying to ignore the gut feeling that you're totally gonna get cursed for it.

Dirk doesn't actually look that much like his brother. They have the same eyebrows and mouth, maybe, but Dirk's chin and nose are more pointed, his cheekbones higher and well-defined. With the two of them right next to each other, you can tell his skin tone's a little more yellow too. He almost looks like an Altmer.

"So," you say.

"So," Dave says.

"Uh, if you don't mind me asking, what exactly are you guys?"

"Vampires," Dirk says, "Thought we covered this."
"Okay, maybe I shouldn't have used present tense. Were you guys Bretons or-"

"Nords." They say sharply and in unison.

"Okay," you say, putting your hands up. "I just thought maybe- I'm only actually half Dunmer, so I- Not a lot of half-elves in Skyrim, you know?"

"Oh," they both seem to relax a little bit.

"For now," Dirk says, choosing his words carefully, "Let's just say in our day it was a lot more common. And it ain't a fun story to tell."

"What about you?" Dave asks quickly. "You've got to have a story, right?"

"Not much of one. My mom was from a rich family and would up in an arranged marriage with a guy twice her age. Got bored and had an affair with my dad. She thought she was pregnant with her husband's kid, but, oops, it was me instead. She left the city in shame as soon as she could."

"Ouch," Dave says.

You shrug. "Not like I really knew any different. Besides, in a big city there's a lot of people who grow up with a missing parent."

"What about him?" Dirk asks, inclining his head towards John.

"Well as far as blood goes he's more Imperial than anything else, but they don't mind mixing so much so there's a lot of Redguard in there and who knows what else. No elf as far as I know, though."

"I was hoping for more stories or somethin'," Dirk says.

"Oh. I have a few bits and pieces I picked up. Like apparently when he was like six he…" You shouldn't be telling these stories. They're his, and you don't even know these guys. Not really. So why does it feel right? Especially when you look at Dave, there's something tugging at the edge of your consciousness. Trust, familiarity… This is vampire magic, it has to be. The same thing that makes people stagger off dreamily into dark alleys. You don't think they're gonna kill you, but… "Uh, he tells it better."

"How'd you meet?" Dave asks.

Well, it probably won't be too bad to tell them that…

"A couple months ago I was doing some mercenary work around Helgen. I was trying to sell some loot I picked up when I heard this horrible roar…"

You sit in the cave for a whole day. Dave and Dirk keep bothering you with questions until they finally pass out. When they leave at sunset you're still just waiting. You fall asleep at some point, because then you open your eyes and John is gone and you smell food. He's practically bouncing, he's so eager and excited to go, like he was the one who waited for your sleeping ass all of yesterday. After that, you're off.

The road is pretty clear and you make good progress. It shouldn't be too far now to Sky Haven Temple now, not if the weather keeps up.

Shit, why did you have to think that?! You know your luck.

"Is that really all you got out of them?" John asks for the millionth time today.

"Yes," you groan.

"Come on Karkat, I know you like to talk, but did you really not let them get a word in edgewise?"

"I couldn't help it. The silence was too awkward!"

"But they're ancient powerful vampires! They have to have some really cool- Oh my gosh, Karkat, look!" He points off into the distance.

"What?" You try to follow his finger but you can't really make out any-

"It's Aradia!"

"What?"

You lift your hand to shield your hands from the harsh glare of the afternoon sun. And yep, that's her alright. She's talking to a Nord about something, but you're too far to make out what.

John, the great idiot, cups his hands around his mouth. "Hey! Hey, Aradia! It's us!"

Ugh.

She sees you and a huge grin splits across her face as she waves. John, of course, stands up nice and tall and waves back.

"Hey, idiot, remember how this is kind of a secret mission? How the Thalmor might still be out to kill us?"

"Psh," he waves you off and begins sliding down the hill. You roll your eyes and follow.

Not for the first time, you have the strong feeling he's going to get you killed horribly.

"What's up, guys?" Aradia asks.

"We're heading to-" You elbow him and he cuts off. "I mean nothing much, what's up with you?"

"Oh, I was just clearing this mine out for Mr. Perth. Apparently he accidentally mined himself a bunch of draugr instead of the moonstone he wanted."

"These your friends, Aradia?" The Nord asks.

"Yep!"

"Well, any time you're in the reach feel free to stop by. Your friend here saved my livelihood, so I'd be happy to let any friend of hers rest at my hearth."

"That's great! Absolutely super!" You say, "But we should probably be going. Things to do, places to see."

"Why? Where are you heading?" Aradia asks.

"It's um… uh…"
You can’t come up with anything, but you don’t have to, because then a dragon flies overhead.

“It’s heading towards Karthspire camp!” Aradia proclaims. “Ooh, this should be fun! I haven’t actually fought a dragon before. Let’s go!”

You decide this is as good of an excuse as any, and you and John run after her.

You, Karkat, and Aradia keep chasing the dragon until it flies down into a valley. It’s not fair, why can they fly so fast!? You start racing on the hill, eyes fixed firmly on the monster. Then you see arrows and lightning fly up from the ground. The dragon crashes to the ground and its soul races towards you.

Oh. At least you were close enough, but wow it seems like the villagers here are-

"Victory for the Old Gods!"

"The Foresworn have claimed this blood!"

Maybe you should have looked down first. You’re a stone's throw from the edge of the foresworn encampment. A few of the Foresworn turn to you. They brandish their crude weaponry and begin to advance, but a tall man covered in war paint and wearing a massive hide headdress places his hand on one of the warriors.

The others nod and step back, allowing the tall man to approach you alone. You begin reaching for your warhammer, and Karkat’s hands are already back on his sickles.

"Hi, Nuac!" Aradia calls out, waving.

"Greetings, Aradia," the man says. "It is good to see you again."

"So, uh, are these guys gonna be cool with us?" John whispers.

"Not sure! Let me ask." She prances forward and embraces Nuac. He wraps almost completely. When they break apart she says, "Can my friends and I have safe passage through your land?"

"After all you've done for us? It is the least we can do. Actually, I would like to do better." He gestures towards the dragon's carcass. "It is tradition that we foresworn feast after all such great victories. Normally we prefer the flesh of the slain beast, but we have enough stores to make one. Will you and your allies celebrate with us?"

"We should." you start.

"Take you up on this generous offer!" Aradia interjects. She gives you a pointed look.

You and Karkat look at each other. Well, she is the expert here. You follow her into the depths of the encampment.

It’s like you’re sitting on the edge of a sword the entire feast. It’s obviously formal and important for them, so your gut reaction is to make with the formality, but the rules are so different here than they are in Cyrodiil. You’re trying to copy Aradia, but you can tell your movements are stiff and awkward. Karkat isn't fairing much better.

But eventually the feast ends. Exhausted, the three of you drag yourselves to a tunnel the foresworn told you would lead to Sky Haven temple. You set up your tents there, in a bare corner on the side. Aradia passes out quickly, but Karkat doesn’t sleep well and you don’t sleep at all.
You're little concerned about the forsworn jumping you in your sleep, but even more than that, you’re worried about what you’ll find in Sky Haven Temple. What if there’s nothing? What if everything has been destroyed? What if you can’t even get in?

You tell yourself this isn’t helping. All lying awake is going to do is make you exhausted in the morning. But you can’t force yourself to relax. You crawl out of your bedroll and sit by the fire. It’s starting to run low, so you stoke it a bit and flames begin to leap up, eagerly consuming your offerings of pine.

For a while you just sit there and watch the flames dance. It’s a good opportunity to not think, the light banishing your fears to the corners of your mind. But soon they come creeping back forwards. And they’re bringing visions with them this time.

*You’re going to fail.*

*Everyone will die.*

*This whole world will die.*

*Your friends will die. Your family will die. Aradia, Jake, Jane, Jade, Vriska, Karkat.*

Yes, thank you very much. This is incredibly unhelpful. Go away, bye.

*Dad will die too.*

You shake your head. It's not real. None of it's real.

But for some reason that last one sticks with you. You know sometime in your life you’ll probably have to deal with your dad dying. Children are *supposed* to outlive their parents; that’s kind of the point. But you’re not ready. He’s still got so much strength, so much life left in him. And without him you don’t know what you would do.

You go to your pack and rip a page from your journal and begin to write.

---

**hi dad, it’s me, john.**

i got your letter back a while ago. i’m glad you were able to hire some of the farm kids to patch the west wing up! we’ll keep sending you what we can.

also, you’re right, it is a little strange that jade is being so secretive about what she’s learning. that’s not really like her. i’m glad jane found a nice girl, though. roxy sounds pretty nice, i hope it all works out and i get to meet her someday!

but to be honest that’s not why i’m writing you. it’s none of that normal stuff we’ve been talking about. i’m scared, dad. but i’m not sure i can do it. i’ve been getting stronger, but i’m supposed to defeat alduin. alduin as in the firstborn of akatosh. as in the actual divine. i’ve met him, i’ve tried to fight him, but nothing works. he didn’t manage to kill me, but i couldn’t land a single hit on him.

i’m not even sure i’m doing good here. skyrim is a mess. you already know about the civil war, but there’s also thalmor combing the countryside looking for us because we’ve gotten involved with what’s left of the blades. and i’m trying to do the whole trusting my heart thing, but every day, every mile has to be dragged out in violence and it doesn't feel right. i just wish there was a better way.
i think the sun will be rising soon. when it does we’re going to get a move on, try to get some answers from these ruins.

please write back soon.

love,

john

Aradia, as perky and energetic as she always seems to be, is already up and preparing breakfast when you wake up. You have no idea how the fuck she does it. It’s not fucking fair. But, to your surprise, John is there too. They’re talking about something, heads low and speaking quietly.

Well, thanks for making sure you were included, guys! You know they probably just wanted you to get some sleep, but still. The two of them are facing away from you, but John apparently recognizes the sound of you rummaging through your shit or something. He smiles and waves you over.

“Good morning, Karkat! We have sausages!”

“What time is it?” You ask, fumbling with your belt.

“The sun rose about half an hour ago,” Aradia says.

You plop down on the log beside John, and he hands you a fork with a sausage on the end of it. “Sorry for interrupting your little secret feelings jam, by the way.”

“You weren’t interrupting anything,” John says. He smiles at you sweetly, but he looks exhausted. He must have had a bad night too. “We were just talking about the ruins.”

“What do you think we’re up against?” You ask before taking a massive bite. Holy shit that’s hot. Yeah, it was just roasting over coals, but STILL.

“Nuac say that there are a few sets of traps,” Aradia says. “But at the end there’s some sort of ritual lock. No one knows how to open it.”

“Great start, right?” John asks sarcastically.

You swallow painfully. “Ow. Yeah. So is this just Nordic stuff, or…?”

“I don’t think so,” John says. “If it has to do with the blades, it’s probably Akaviri.”

“Great,” you say. “A civilization we know even less about.”

“I’ve been in an Akaviri structure once,” John says. “Back in Cyrodiil there’s a place called Cloud Ruler Temple. I mean, I’m not sure when this temple was abandoned, but that one was used up until the end of the third era.”

“How was that one protected?” you ask.

“Same thing basically, several layers of traps before an inner sanctum. But, of course, all the script was ancient Akaviri.”

“Can you read it?”
John makes an uneasy noise. “I remember a few words. Their language has about a billion characters, but a lot of them combinations of simpler ones and they don't always make a ton of sense because of idioms and homophones and stuff. Like I really only learned it because Jake would write notes to himself in Akaviri and I wanted to know what they said.”

You sigh. “Well, we’ve stumbled around blindly before.” You shove your fork back in the coals to burn off the leftover fat. “Let’s do this.”

It’s surprisingly bright in the ruins, all things considered. The early morning light streams down into the chamber. You’re presented with your first challenge and -oh, shock and awe- it’s another “match the three symbols” puzzle.

You get a good look at the three pictures and start combing the space for any of them. But then you hear stone sliding.

“John, the fuck are you doing?” you demand.

“Well, there’s three letters on these. King, one that can mean either grain or potential, and lizard child. And something tells me that the last one…” He finishes turning the final pillar. “Is supposed to mean dragonborn.”

A drawbridge falls, allowing you to continue.

“Nice work, John!” Aradia says.

“Seriously?” you ask. “That was the puzzle?”

“Apparently,” John says, walking onto the bridge. “I guess it’s maybe like, you have to know why this place was built?”

“Or more for whom,” Aradia suggests.

“Yeah, or that.”

You shake your head and follow.

The next room is littered with tiles covered in the different symbols.

“Pressure plates,” you say. “Hey, John, you’re in the best armor. Wanna see if that same trick works twice?”

He nods and follows the path laid out by the tiles with that same dragonborn symbol until he reaches a chain. He pulls it and all of the tiles fall about half an inch.

“Well that was easy,” you say. “What’s next, we have to write the symbol in some dirt or something?”

“I don’t think so,” he says. “This next one looks kind of weird.”

Frowning, you cross the now-safe room. “What do you mean?”

There’s a large empty chamber, covered in lichen and moss. But there’s no door, no way to continue. Across from the entrance there’s a stone massive head. But there’s no dials, no levers, nothing obvious.

“I wonder if that’s blocking the entrance,” Aradia says. “Maybe there’s a switch or something?”
“Maybe.” John says. He walks across the room, dislodging some of the moss with his boots as he goes.

It’s then that you notice something on the floor.

“Hang on a second,” you say.

You take a few steps forward and kneel down, clearing the rest of the moss. When you finish, you find yourself staring at a massive piece of polished onyx, a circle about four feet in diameter. Engraved into it is another strange symbol. This one is a diagonal line with three droplets coming down from it.

Aradia leans over to get a better look. “Huh, that’s a weird one. John, do you know what this says?”

“Hmm? No, I don’t think I’ve seen that before.”

“Blood,” you say, “I think it means blood.”

“Why do you say that?” John asks.

“Look, it’s like an open wound. See, here’s the cut, and here’s blood coming out of it. I think…” you look up at him, “I think we need a little bit of dragonborn blood.”

He and Aradia look at each other and shrug. “Well, worth a shot,” he says.

John kneels down next to the symbol and removes his gauntlet. Pulling a dagger from his belt, he slices his wrist. He winces with pain, but tilts his arm so that a few drops fall onto the symbol. As soon as the blood makes contact, the red spreads unnaturally quickly.

John straightens up and heals his wound as the symbol begins to glow. There’s a rough scraping noise as the head begins to tilt up. You see nothing but darkness in the cavern ahead.

“Nice going, Karkat!” Aradia says. “I think that might be it. Let’s go!”

She leaps forward and you follow. After a moment, your eyes adjust well enough to notice a few streams of bluish light filtering down through holes in the ceiling, but not many. John summons a ball of magelight, so now the room is a little less dark but looks a lot more haunted. Great.

“So the secret to defeating Alduin is somewhere in here,” Aradia says, voice full of awe.


“Well there’s definitely something. Look there.” She smiles and points ahead.

On the far side of the cavern is a wall about six feet high and thirty feet wide. The carving in the middle, coil after coil of serpentine body, couldn’t be anything but Alduin.

“This is beautiful!” Aradia exclaims. “These are the most amazing and detailed carvings I’ve ever seen in ruins like this. Look at how well preserved they are! This is definitely the story of the dragon war.”

“But does it say anything about a weapon? Or a spell?” You ask, trying to see what the people are armed with, but it looks like normal swords and stuff.

“Well look here, there’s a person standing under Alduin, and I think he might be yelling?”
“Well,” John leans in over your shoulder. “That looks like the symbols for noise and spell mashed together. Maybe it’s a shout? But I don’t know any of those that could take down a normal dragon, much less Alduin.”

“Maybe there’s some hints over here,” Aradia suggests. At the beginning of the wall is row after row of script.

“Oh gosh, my Akaviri isn’t that good,” he says sheepishly.

“Better than ours,” you point out.

“Well, I guess.” He summons another ball of might and then leans in close, squinting at the markings. “Alright, so uh, ‘bad king time in world ummm this can mean nation or house or just land, but whatever it is there’s eight of them. When the brass tall house goes and time again sculpted? made?’”

“When misrule takes its place at the eight corners of the world,” Aradia says “When the brass tower walks and time is reshaped…”

“When the thrice blessed fail and other shit happens the world-eater wakes and the wheel turns upon the last dragonborn,” You finish. “We’ve read the book of the dragonborn, Aradia. We know the prophecy. But it’s not like it’s going to be much help!”

“There’s more here, though,” John says. “I mean, I always thought it was weird there were only six lines in that. Akaviri prophecies are usually ten. I think this is the missing peace.”

“So what does that say, then?” You ask, pointing to the bottom of the poem.

“Oh, um. line one is like ‘soon king-prince maybe?- dragonborn, uhh I don’t know what those three symbols mean, warrior, not enough. The second is north-land… five, six, seven, there’s twenty but it’s written weird, together become- gather, I guess? At least I think it is, because ‘together’ is also a euphemism, but I don’t think we’re going to beat Alduin with an orgy. Time, something like king but different, die, and I have no idea what that symbol means. And then the last line is really weird. Broken other world together, freedom in victory.”

“Cool. But what does that mean?”

“If I had to guess,” he says, straightening back up, "there’s something to do with me, a prince, and a warrior, but that’s not enough on its own. North-land probably means Skyrim, so we’re bringing stuff together. And that’ll kill the time-king, which might be Alduin? And then I have no idea.”

“Okay, so you need to find twenty of something before you can beat Alduin.” Aradia suggests.

“Twenty words, maybe?” You ask. “Like it’s a twenty-word shout with all the words scattered around Skyrim?”

John nods. “That makes sense, though I thought all shouts were supposed to be three words.”

“Well, this one is obviously something special,” Aradia says. “I mean, if it’s going to kill Alduin.”

“I guess. But just to be sure, you’ve got that rubbing stuff, right, Karkat?”

“Sure, why do you need it?” You take off your pack and start digging through it.

“I never learned a lot of Akaviri, but Jake did. If we send this to him, maybe we can get a better
“Won’t it get all smudged up?” You ask.

“We’ve sent carvings back and forth to other people before.” John takes the paper and charcoal and begins to rub it back and forth over the carvings. “And even if it does get a little smudged, it’s better than trying to draw this by hand.”

“I suppose so…” You say.

You’re trying not to doubt, but you can’t help but get the feeling that this whole thing was a waste of time. Hopefully Jake speaks cryptic dead languages better than you do.

dear orgnar

hi! i’m sure you’ll share this with your friend, but i have some fun news for both of you. she might even want to tell her dad!

my friend and i left a bit early to head west to check out those ruins. i know you won’t like that we went without you, but we made it! we think you guys will really love it. the next time you come to see your dear friend Eydis, just head a bit north and find a man named Perth. He’ll help you find our friend, Aradia, who will guide you through the ruins. They’re really a sight. I think your friend’s dad especially will get a kick out of it!

anyway, write us when you get the chance. we’re heading towards Iverstead. We’re going to be making the pilgrimage this spring once the snow melts. You know how it is.

J.E.

John sits near the fire, carefully sealing his letters with the little bit of wax you carry around.

“You’re really gonna send that to Delphine?” You ask. “You wanna write ‘hi it’s me the dragonborn, and anyone with two brain cells would figure that out and chase after us to the Throat of the World’? Or maybe address this right to the Thalmor embassy? That’s where it’s going to end up!”

John rolls his eyes. “Come on, Karkat. You’re always so negative. This’ll be fine.”

“John, my most beloved, light of my life, have you met me? Do you know my fucking luck?”

“It has historically been pretty awful!” Aradia says happily.

“ Fucking Nine. You’re not helping.”

“Heh, that’s okay. I mean, my luck has been pretty good so far,” John says, pressing his thumb into the cooling wax of the last letter.

“I don’t know how much we can trust that.”

“Well, what else can we do? Here,” he gives the parcel for Jake and the letters to Aradia. “How much do you think they’ll charge you for these? I can give you a little extra for heading out of your way.”

She waves him off. “Don’t worry about it! I was wandering north anyway, so it’ll be easy to stop at
Markarth, and I’m happy to be part of the whole saving Skyrim thing. Just make sure to write me if you get any sort of warning before the end of the world. I want to be there to see everything unravel!”

“Uh, sure. Okay,” John says.

“Alright, I’ll see you soon!” She places the mail in her pack and bolts.

And the two of you are now alone with a massive village of forsworn.

“Let’s get out of here,” you say.

“Yes,” replies John.

TIRDAS, 17TH SUN’S DAWN 4E202

WE SHOULD REACH IVARSTEAD TOMORROW. FINALLY. ACTUALLY, WE’RE HOLED UP IN A LITTLE MOUNTAIN CAVE, AND THE THROAT OF THE WORLD IS JUST TO THE NORTH, BUT WE KNOW THERE’S NO WAY WE COULD MAKE IT DIRECTLY UP THE MOUNTAIN.

GOD, I HATE TRAVELING AT NIGHT. IT’S ALWAYS SO FUCKING COLD, ESPECIALLY SINCE WE’RE GOING THROUGH THIS NARROW PASS, CLIMBING OVER SNOW AND SHIT. I DON’T CARE HOW MUCH I HATE THE GREYBEARDS, WHEN WE GET THERE WE’RE STAYING FOR LIKE A WEEK.

OR HOWEVER LONG IT TAKES FOR MY BONES TO START TO THAW.

WAIT, SHIT, WE CAN’T. WE PROMISED THE SPIDERBITCH WE’D BE BACK NORTH ON THE TWENTY-FIRST. MAYBE IF I’M LUCKY JOHN WILL HAVE FORGOTTEN…

BY KYNARETH’S HOLY ASS-WIND I CAN’T WAIT FOR SPRING.
The wind is eerily still as you climb the mountain. You made it to Ivarsted early afternoon, took a short break, and then began climbing upwards. Over the winter things have changed. The snow obscures the path in some places, so you keep losing the steps and for a while you have to do your best not to fall to your death for a while before they magically appear again.

You have no idea how these guys survive the winter.

The task gets harder once the sun sets, but you just keep creating magelight so you can see where you're going. Eventually, about two hours after dark, you stumble your way into High Hrothgar. At least being this far away from civilization they keep their doors unlocked, so you don't have to stay out there in the cold.

It's hard to say if the Greybeards are surprised to see you or not. They simply stare at the two of you from beneath their hoods. Karkat puffs up a little, gets a defiant look in his eye. You just hope he's doing it for himself and isn't about to start a fight.

"Welcome back, Dragonborn," Arngeir says. "Have you recovered the horn?"

"Oh, right!" You drop your pack and rummage through it before you finally find it. You unwind the socks you'd wrapped it in for protection and then hold it out. "Here you go!"

"Well done." The horn disappears into the depths of his sleeve.

"So now can you tell me how to kill Alduin?" You ask excitedly.

"Kill Alduin?" The old man scoffs. "Where ever did you get such a foolish idea?"

"Well, isn’t that supposed to be like my destiny or something? I mean, we went to Sky Haven temple and it looks like there’s some sort of shout we can do to beat him. If anyone would know, wouldn’t it have to be you?"

"The blades," he growls. "Of course they would try to get involved with this, always sticking their noses where they don’t belong. You’d do well to ignore them, Dovahkiin. Now for your next mission-"

"No," Karkat says. He takes a step forward. "After all this- Alduin’s back, and he’s raising dragons. You’re not sending us off on another quest to get the shoehorn of Vlad Skyhat or something! You have to help us!"

Arngeir glares harshly at him, you can see Karkat waver a little, but he holds his ground. “Cease this foolishness, child. If it is time for the world to end, we must embrace it and ready ourselves. Besides, even if I thought it would be a good idea to teach you the dragonrend shout, I do not know
“But if you know what it’s called you have to know something about it!” You argue. “Look, you’re clearly really wise and powerful and stuff, but you haven’t seen him. You haven’t fought him. We have. And I’m not just gonna let him keep flying around murdering people!”

"I told you, I know nothing!"

"What about your boss?" You ask. "Would she know anything?"

“Pyralspite does not speak to just anyone, and she will not see you.”

“Well that old lady is going to have to!” Karkat snaps. "Where is she? We're talking to her!"

Arngeir laughs. “Please, you cannot make it to the top of the mountain without our help. The winds are too strong for any mortal to survive.”

Winds? You smile. “We’ll just have to see about that. Come on Karkat.”

Karkat looks a little surprised, then he frowns concernedly. "John, are you sure we should-"

"Do you want to prove them wrong or not?" You demand.

He sighs. "You're such an ass, appealing to my sense of spite. Fine, I trust you."

You laugh. "Glad to hear it!"

The two of you step out into the courtyard and the greybeards follow.

Once you’re sure they’re all watching you take a deep breath in, and then push your hands downwards.

The wind falls silent at your command.

They greybeards all let out audible gasps of shock. You glance over at Karkat, and you can swear you see little hearts in his eyes. Oh man, if the Greybeards didn’t have communal sleeping quarters, you would so be getting laid tonight.

The wind threatens to blow again. Shit! Focus, John. Focus.

“Lets go,” you say.

Karkat nods and together the two of you make your way up to meet the leader of the greybeards.

“Holy shit John. I mean holy shit. That was absolutely, completely, amazing! I can’t believe that you-”

“I’m sorry, Karkat, I’m trying to not get us killed.”

“Oh, right.” You look away and blush. Good job, Karkat. “I, uh, guess I’ll just watch ahead. This Pyralspite lady has to have a house or something up here.

“Yeah.” Shit he’s staring to sound breathless. You need to get there soon or he’s going to pass out.

The storm is starting to creep back in around you. Are you getting close? How the fuck can you even tell? Everything just looks the same, and the path – if there is one – is buried under two feet
of snow. You’re going uphill, you know that much, but how helpful will that be if she doesn’t live on the actual summit?

Suddenly, things go darker. Fuck, shit, fuck, fuck what’s going on? Are the clouds coming back? You tilt your head skyward and, fuck, it’s a dragon. A massive one too, moving across the moons and casting a massive shadow upon the snow. For fuck’s sake, you’re in no position to fight! You should have been prepared, but you didn’t think anything could fly this high.

“John! Let the wind up!” You yell.

He does, but the dragon lets out a horrific shout, and the winds fall again. You reach for your weapons, but the dragon is already swooping, its massive white bulk stark against the blackness of the sky. But it’s not aiming at you.

Instead, the creature lands not thirty feet in front of you. Its massive red eyes pull you in so strongly you don’t even notice the smaller figure approaching on foot.

“Well, well, well,” she says. “What do we have here, miss Pyral?”

It's been years but… you'd recognize that high clear voice anywhere.

“Terezi?” You squint against the darkness. "Is that really you?"

She steps in front of the dragon. She’s still as slim and sharp and beautiful as the last time you saw her, but she stares back at you with eyes as white as the dragon beside her. Your old friend grins and, with a flourish of her staff, takes a little bow.

“At your service.”

"Karkat?" John asks, "Who is this?"

You can’t do anything but gape, but thankfully she fills in for you.

"Terezi Pyrope," she says. "And you're the Dragonborn. Your name's John, right? Nice to meet you."

"Uh, hi," John replies. "I wasn't really expecting-"

The wind begins to howl again. The dragon lets out another shout and it immediately stops.

"Yeah, that's a good point," Terezi says. "We should get moving. Come on, I'll show you to my place."

She and the dragon lead you around, past a few more rocks. She obviously knows exactly where she's going, not even bothering to search the ground with her staff. Very soon you come across a small plateau. On one edge, tucked against several huge pillars of stone, sits a small cottage. Terezi opens the door and gestures for you to enter. You and John take a seat at her small table and she stalks over to the hearth. The door doesn't shut. Instead, the dragon sticks its massive head through, and lays it on the stone floor.

"Okay," You say, trying with all your might to keep your voice under control and remember how words work. "What?"

"This is my house. I'm getting you cider. You go blind too?"

"No, not that! How did you end up here?! Why didn’t you tell anyone?!!"
She shrugs and places a couple mugs down in front of you and John. “I mean, I’m just living with a dragon. You showed up on my doorstep with the dragonborn himself, and I hear those are a lot rarer these days. He sounds awfully cute too.”

You feel your cheeks start to heat and no, no! She is not getting you on the defensive! “And why the fuck are you blind?!”

“Karkat, please, you of all people should know that I am a sensitive flower and it’s rude to ask a lady about any of her physical inadequacies.”

“Come on,” you say with a scoff. “You and I both know you’re about as soft as a horker’s hide.”

She gasps. “And now comments about my weight? How rude! Come here and let me see if you ever managed to lose that baby fat on your cheeks.” She lets out one of her signature cackles and lunges across the table at you.

You ought to react, to push her away and curse at her. And yet- Maybe John's making you go soft with his southern touchy feely crap. So you let her run her fingertips lightly across your face. She's mapping you, you realize, trying to figure out what you look like now. You close your eyes and let her have this. It's kind of sweet, actually. You can't help but smile.

“I-" You barely catch yourself before you admit to missing her. "It's nice to see you," you say instead.

She pinches one of your cheeks. “Nice to see you too, Karkles.”

You shove her off. She's grinning maliciously at you, and you try your best to put on your annoyed face. “Are you ever actually going to tell us how you got here?” you demand. “The last time I saw you you were being dragged away by about twenty guards.”

For the first time, the smile fades from her lips. Then before you can blink it’s back again. “How about we swap? Since you're in my house, you tell me how you met this asshole, and I’ll tell you how I met her.” She points her thumb over towards the dragon in the threshold.

Okay, fine. If she wants it to be like that… You shrug and start speaking.

In spite of yourself, you’ve missed this. You’ve missed Karkat’s nasally voice rambling on and on in your ear. You can almost smell the sea again, hear Gamzee and Tavros playing “music” in the corner, taste the food and ale from the New Gnisis Cornerclub, see all of your other friends sitting around the table pretending to listen as Karkat blathers on and on until Sollux gets bored and starts up a fight.

You can’t help but wonder what he actually looks like now. It hasn’t been that long, all things considered, but he feels older now. His cheekbones seem sharper, his skin a bit tougher, and he’s graduated to being literally kind of prickly when you rub him the wrong way.

He keeps rambling on, oblivious to your pondering. Well, it is Karkat, after all. “-And then John was like ‘fuck no, I’m going to suppress this storm instead’ and he did the thing and we walked right up and here we are.”

“Eh, took me a while to get into it, the middle dragged, and the end left much to be desired,” you say.

“Oh fuck off,” he groans with obvious fondness.
“You’re in my house!”

“Whatever. Now are you going to tell us how you wound up blind, with a dragon, and up here?”

“To make a long story short, Vriska.” You take a deep drink from your cup. Hmm, you’re running low. Better go get some more.

“And to make a short story long?” He asks, tapping his finger on the table.

“Well, she saved my life for one thing.” Tap, tap, tap. Patience never was his virtue. You pour yourself more cider. “Anyone want any while I’m up?”

“I think I could-” John starts to say

“Don’t. She’ll pour it on your lap.”

“Karkat! I would never!”

“You did it to me. Twice. Before you were blind.”

You cackle at him. “I’ve changed, really!”

“Maybe no one's told you this, but being blind does not stop you from having that wicked gleam in your eye.”

“Eh, fair enough.” You bring the whole pot to the table so they can get more as they please and then you won't have to move.

You just hold your cup in your hands, relishing its gentle warmth. “So yeah, I was pretty sure they were going to kill me too. When they put me in a cell I figured they just wanted to weaken me first so I wouldn’t take a good chunk of Eastmarch’s finest down with me. But no. Honestly, they wanted to know about you.”

“Seriously?” Karkat asks.

“Yeah. They somehow got it in their heads that you were the ringleader of the whole event, probably having something to do with the ridiculous amount of damage you caused and how you were shouting orders to the rest of us like you actually knew what you were doing. And with Kanaya and Gamzee gone they figured I would be the most likely to know where you went. So they-”

Fire. Ice. Lightning coursing through your body. Chains on your ankles and wrists. Food just outside your reach. Blasts of magic barely missing your head, coming close enough to scorch your hair. Then the sticks coming in closer and closer while your eyes were held open and then black. Just hunger, cold, thirst, damp.

“-They tried to get me to rat you out. But I had no idea where you were, so I couldn’t have talked even if I wanted to. I was there for about a week. That’s when I went blind.”

“Terezi…” Karkat starts to say. You can feel the emotion welling up inside of him, threatening to spill out, threatening to affect you. No, Terezi. Just read them. Don't actually take the thoughts as your own. You're better than that.

“So anyway, Vriska bribed the guards and got in, and then she picked the lock on my cell. Said she found out her mom was down in Riften and since my family had taken her in before it was only fair
for me to come with her. She, uh, didn’t take the part about me going blind very well. Heh, they probably would have killed both of us for what we did to those guards if they caught us, too.”

The screams, the scent of blood. The feeling of their eyes in your hands, carefully removed from their sockets so that those bastards could still see out of them. You squeezed, feeling them pop under the pressure like ripe snowberries. You can’t help but smile in satisfaction at the thought.

“So naturally I agreed to go with her. We were most of the way to Riften proper when I started hearing this voice. Except it’s not really hearing, more like thinking in a voice I’d never heard? It's weird.”

John makes a little interested noise.

"It was soft at first, but then it got louder and louder until I could start understanding what she said. And that was Pyralspite! Basically she knew that shit would start happening soon, and apparently she picked me. I think maybe she thought I could relate because we both went blind. And then one night when Vriska was asleep she flew down. I rubbed her muzzle—”

Pyralspite nudges your hand.

You laugh. “Yeah, like that. And it just felt right. She offered me a place to stay where I could actually still be helpful, not just sit around and leeche off of my friends or wind up on the streets. So I wrote Vriska a little note saying I was fine and left on Pyralspite’s back. I’ve been here ever since.”

It gets quiet and you’re not sure what to say. Maybe you shouldn’t have dropped that bit about why you came. Ugh, you need to practice talking to people who don’t know your every thought. And all that pure Vantas empathy makes you feel dizzy. It was bad before, but now… you try to block it out, focus on John instead. But there’s something odd about his thoughts, his feelings seem like they’re kind of twisted up. Hard to say if it’s because of his weird magic or actual emotional turmoil. But before you can think about it too much, Karkat breaks.

“Just—” He sniffles. Aw, poor crybaby Karkat. You offer him a spare handkerchief and he takes it. “When we were in Riften, Vriska said you were out there somewhere, but I assumed that she was just messing with me. I wanted to believe, but I never quite could and now—now—”

He starts weeping openly.

You sigh. “Oh, John, what are we going to do with him?”

He doesn’t say anything.

“John?”

“Oh wait! I shrugged, um, sorry.”

“Ha! This is our dragonborn? Well I feel safe! Tell me, now that you’re up here do you feel all inspired to save the world?”

“Shit, that’s right! Um, Miss Pyralspite, ma’am, I need you to teach me the dragonrend shout.”

Ah yes. I suppose I should not be surprised.

There’s a creaking of wood as John and Karkat both presumably startle in their chairs. Pyralspite, as always, continues undeterred.
Do not be afraid, dovahkiin. At least, not of me. I am nothing but an old, infirm female at this point—
Pfft, yeah right.

-And none wish for Alduin’s destruction more than I.

Okay, that part's true.

“D-do you hear this too?” John asks. There's still a little bit of static, but at least his confusion is coming through bright and clear.

“Yeah. I think?” Karkat replies, "If you mean the echoing voice in my head.”

You cackle. “You get used to it after a while. Pyralspite isn’t the best at verbal conversations. Sometimes things get set on fire.”

My tongue never fully grasped your mortal language, and when we speak in our mother language... well, things happen.

But you are not interested in that. You wish to know Dragonrend.

“Yeah! Can you teach me?” You can taste the excitement in his voice, feel it echo in your bones.

No.

“Oh.”

Dragonrend was created by mortals to be used against our kind. it is completely foreign to us. Unspeakable. Unthinkable, even.

“So that’s it, then?” Karkat asks. “It’s gone forever?” Sadness presses down on both of them.

I did not say that. The mortals of the first age used Dragonrend on Alduin, yes, but they also used an Elder Scroll to banish him through time. The banishment took place atop this mountain, eons ago, and it tore a hole in time just yonder. I waited, guarding it, for thousands and thousands of years until Alduin reemerged from the rift.

“Okay,” John says, "So how does that help us learn the shout?"

Find the scroll, and we may be able to see back through that rift in time. With luck, being Dovahkiin may allow you to learn and even improve upon that shout.

You turn to her, as though she would notice the incredulous expression on her face. Hopefully she'll feel it. “An Elder Scroll?” You ask, verbalizing your thoughts for the boys' sakes, "But those things are super powerful and super rare. Where the hell are we gonna get one?"

“It doesn’t matter.” Karkat says. Whelp, that's his mind made up. His psyche feels even more like a brick wall than it used to. “We have to. Maybe if we keep heading towards Winterhold one of the mages will be able to find it?"

“Well, better chance there than anywhere else. To Winterhold, then!”

Pyralspite leans forward, blows a soft, warm puff of air on John. Hopefully he'll figure out it's a good thing. Well, that is one choice made, and a million futures that will never come to pass. But I was not all that fond of any of them anyway. Goodnight.
“Night,” you say, giving her cheek one last stroke before she goes.

Pyralspite pulls her head back and nudges the door closed, leaving the three of you alone.

You wake up early in the morning. The sun glistens on the snow outside. You and Karkat are curled up together near the dying embers of Terezi’s hearth. She’s on her bed not far away snoring softly.

You poke your head outside and it looks like the weather's clear for miles. You need to head out soon, to get as far as you can before you lose the sun or another storm rolls in. Terezi manages to sleep through you and Karkat getting dressed, gathering your things, and grabbing a quick breakfast. Well, that's two things going well for you already today.

Pyralspite sits perched atop a word wall. The Nord voices are chanting at you again, so you roll your eyes and approach. The world gets all white and blurry, you learn a new word, and things settle back down.

_Intriguing. So this is how dragonborns learn our tongue._

"Well, I get part of the meaning, but it's like… I can't say it? It's weird."

_I see._ She blinks slowly.

"Hey, can you do us a favor and tell Terezi that we're leaving?" You ask.

_Certainly. But I offer you a warning. In the future, do not ask favors of dragons. We have long memories, and will always claim our debts._

Oh, uh, right. Well, that's not foreboding at all. Karkat looks at you nervously and the two of you start descending the mountain.

Pyral must be keeping the way clear for you, because there's none of the harsh wind that had threatened you yesterday. So now you're alone. With nothing but your own thoughts to bother you.

"Hey, Karkat?"

"Yeah?"

"I've been wondering about something since last night."

He sighs. "Yeah, she's always had an uncanny ability to tell what you're thinking, but it's gotten worse. I don't know if it's because she's blind or she's older or if the dragon taught her, but-"

"It's not that," you say. "I just, uh, what happened between you and Terezi?"

He furrows his brow. "What do you mean? You were there the whole time."

"I meant before that. Were the two of you… were you ever a thing like you and Gamzee were a thing?"

"What?! John, where did you get that idea?!"

You break eye contact. Your face feels hot. "Donno, I was kind of getting the feeling that something was there…"
He sighs. "I mean, you're not entirely wrong. I used to- when I was younger I had a thing for her."

"So were you ever-?"

"No. I liked her, but she didn't feel the same. She thought I was fun but really just wanted to be friends."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, it was a fucking mess." He lets out a dry laugh. "You know, I spent years trying to convince her she should be with me. It didn't work, of course. It was just a high steaming pile of suck."

You hesitate before finally getting to the question that's been bugging you since last night. "So, say she changed her mind, would you ever try to-"

He gasps. "You're jealous."

"I am not!"

"You are! Fucking Azura you're actually- Look, John, don't be dumb. You are the best fucking thing that's ever happened to me. I know I don't deserve this, but you…" He looks over at you, his expression sweet and tender and a little bit sad. "You're everything to me I love you."

"Just…" You look away. "It's hard when you still obviously care about her so much."

He sighs. "Of course I do. We were friends for a long, long time. And I guess… even if it's stupid, it's hard to forget your first love, I guess. It doesn't matter how happy you are, how great your life is actually going. You just can't help but sit and wonder sometimes what if. With her it's almost like… memories of feelings that are still kind of feelings? I don't know. It's stupid, never mind."

You swallow. "No, I think I actually get that."

"You do?"

"Mm-hmm. When I was a kid I spent a couple years as a page in Chorrol. And I had the biggest crush on the count's oldest daughter."

"Oh?" He looks inquisitively at you.

"Yeah," if you weren't blushing before you sure are now. "Gods, I feel stupid admitting it too. Because she's ten years older than me and was already engaged when I started noticing her, and now she's countess so kind of also my boss."

"Okay, that's pretty bad." He says with a little laugh.

"I was like nine! Eventually I figured out it wouldn't work out in a million years, but I guess… I probably still care about her a little more than a little more than a vassal should."

You walk past High Hrothgar without even going in.

"Hey," Karkat lets his voice go low and sultry. "How about the next time we're somewhere with a roof over our heads I'll take some time and show you just how much I like you?"

"Sure," you say, without really meaning it.

He knows. And you know he knows. But he just looks away and frowns.
WE’RE ALMOST UP TO SNOW VEIL SANCTUM.

JOHN’S BEEN REALLY QUIET ALL DAY. I SHOULDN’T HAVE TOLD HIM ABOUT TEREZI. I KEEP TRYING TO SHOW HIM THAT I CARE, BUT THE WORDS NEVER COME OUT RIGHT. HE KEEPS BRUSHING ME OFF.

HE’S PRETENDING TO BE HAPPY, BUT WHENEVER HE THINKS I’M NOT LOOKING HIS EXPRESSION GETS ALL EMPTY AND HE LOOKS LIKE A KICKED PUPPY.

I JUST FEEL LIKE SUCH A FUCKING ASS.

BUT TOMORROW WE MEET UP WITH MINDFANG. JOHN DIDN’T FORGET. MAYBE IT’S JUST OLD HABITS, BUT I’M GETTING REALLY NERVOUS ABOUT THE WHOLE THING.

THIS HAS ALL BEEN TOO EASY. AND SOMETHING ABOUT MINDFANG FEELS EVEN MORE SINISTER THAN VRISKA. I’M NOT SURE HOW TO EXPLAIN IT, BUT…

JUST FUCK SERKETS, MAN.

As far as you’re concerned, the sanctum itself is nothing too special. It looks just like any other Nordic tomb. The sun has scarcely risen, so the occasional long shadow is your only reprieve from the brightness of the sky and the snow. Mindfang stands waiting, her silhouette black against the bright eastern sky. You’re just glad you’ve got something important to do. Hopefully it’ll get your mind off of feelings things.

“So you made it,” she says once you’re close enough.


“I believe so. I came early, staked this place out through the night, but it seems like she still beat me to it.”

“How do you know that?” Karkat demands. “Couldn’t she be late?”

“No. I found her horse. Don’t worry. I took care of it and raided her things. Looks like she had been expecting me. She left this.”

Mindfang offers up a torn piece of paper, though the writing on it is light and elegant. It says, “Find me deep inside, dear sister. We shall finish what you started eighteen years ago.”

“Sister?” You ask.

“She may still call me that, but as far as I’m concerned she severed that bond with her blade long ago.”

You shiver, fairly certain it was more her voice than the cold morning breeze that made you do it.

“But, John, let’s go. Karkat, stay here. Guard the door.”
“What?” he demands. "Why?!"

She rolls her eye. “Because, Karliah might try to run away. She's expecting me, not him, so she might try to run, and she could walk through a rainstorm without getting wet. But if she wants to come out, she’ll have to open this door. And this way we’ll have someone waiting for her.”

Karkat nods solemnly. “I get it.”

“Good boy. You might have a place in our organization yet.” She pats him condescendingly on the head.

“Now, John. Let’s go.”

You drop your pack and start pulling your armor out.

"What are you doing? I said let's go!"

"I thought you wanted me to be your front line? If I'm going to be taking hits, I want more than just robes and a breastplate."

She frowns. "Bloody battlemages. Fine."

You get ready to go as quick as you can, with her constantly trying to get you to go faster. Like Karliah wasn't trapped and waiting for you. But eventually you have your armor on, and a few potions strapped to you. Now all that's left to do is say goodbye.

You give Karkat a quick peck. “See you soon.”

He smiles. “Yeah, you’d better, asshat.”

Mindfang opens the door and you stride forward.

Even with Karliah doing her best to stop you, setting up trap after trap and encounter after encounter with the draugr, you make quick progress. You understand why Mindfang wanted you to come along. She’s quick, but not particularly sturdy. Every time she takes even a glancing blow she needs healing. But not much can get through ebony plate and you’ve gotten really good at spotting the nordic traps, even with your vision being compromised by the helmet.

They had a lich, which caused a bit of a problem, but you and Mindfang both prioritized him so he went down pretty fast too. Still, you went through a lot of health potions. Gods, you are gonna crash really hard once this is over. So Karkat will probably be mad at you again, but there’s not that much you can really do.

Then finally, finally, you make it to the inner sanctum. It’s behind a nordic puzzle door, but Mindfang just brushes her hair out of her eye and goes to fiddle with it. Suddenly the door opens.

“How did you do that?” You ask.

She gives you a proud smile. “Maybe someday I’ll teach you. It’s soooooooo easy, John. You won’t believe it. Now lead on.”

“Okay!” You say.

You proudly stride forward and- Fuck! Pain races through your arm. You look down and there’s an arrow embedded just under your left shoulder, the one weak point in the armor. Of course.
You feel dizzy. The world spins, blurs and then you’re on the floor.

“Heh, nice shot, sis,” Mindfang says sarcastically. “Maybe if you were actually as good with your weapons as you are with your plans I’d be dead.”

“Or our master would still be alive,” her voice is smooth and low, almost the opposite of Mindfang’s.

“Pfff, details.”

Wait, what?

“After all these years, you still feel no regret.”

“Youngling, what a silly notion. Regret is for the weak. What was that old saying of his? ‘Take what you can, and give nothing back?’”

She lied, didn’t she?

“Perhaps when we were initiates, but you have forgotten your oath as a nightingale.”

Mindfang scoffs. “Please, if you think you can stop me, come on. I’m sure Gallus would be happy to see you again.”

She’s not going to let you live, is she?

“No.” Karliah puts her sword away. “I know better than that. I know that crossing blades with you would be inviting death. But this is not yet over.” And with that she turns invisible. You see a slight ripple in the air as she moves past you and out of the room.

Shit! Come on, John. Move! Your body refuses to listen to you. You try to heal yourself, but your magic isn't responding either.

“Dammit!” Scowling, Mindfang approaches you. “What a shame. I was just planning to do away with her quickly, and then perhaps we both would have been able to leave alive. But now you know too much.” She pulls out her knife and looks at it with boredom. “I suppose I’ll have to take the back entrance and sneak up on your friend. Vriska might be a bit sad, but she does know how dangerous these nordic ruins can be. Goodbye, John. I’ll be sure to give Vriska your regards.”

She lifts her knife and you shut your eyes. So this is it. You should have listened to Karkat. Why did you think you could just go along with-

Mindfang lets out a blood-curdling scream and you open your eyes. An arrow is embedded in her upper thigh. The knife clatters to the ground.

Someone is running from behind you, and then there’s Karkat, standing between you and Mindfang with his sickles at the ready.

“You little shit,” she spits, "Didn’t I tell you to watch the door?"

“Well it’s a good thing I didn’t listen!” He rushes towards her, but she lunges out of the way and turns invisible.

“I’m no fool.” her voice echoes throughout the chamber. “I won’t fight while I can barely hold a weapon. But if you ever set foot in Riften again be ready.”
You hear her heavy, uneven steps as she runs, but Karkat doesn’t chase after her. Instead, he kneels down next to you, gently touches your face. You realize you don’t feel it.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

You try to answer, but you can’t make a sound.

“He’ll be fine. He’s just paralyzed.” Karliah?

“Who the fuck are you?” Karkat asks, readying his sickles.

“The other person she wanted dead.”

Karliah kneels down next to you too and takes a small vial from her belt. She tilts your head and pours it into your mouth. Oh hey, you can feel your face again! Sensation slowly starts spreading downwards. You try to clench your fist but your fingers just weakly tremble.

“Take it easy. That was the strongest potion of paralysis I could make. Don’t overexert yourself too quickly.”


“I’m sorry. I couldn’t get a clean shot at her. I had hoped that maybe if I was able to hit him that when she inevitably betrayed him his heart might be slowed enough to keep him from bleeding out.”

“That sounds like an absolutely brilliant idea! Why didn’t I think of that?” Wow, even for Karkat that’s a lot of sarcasm.

She frowns. “I’m sorry for any harm I may have caused to your companion. It was a split second decision, and perhaps I made the wrong call. Can you lift him?”

“Huh? Why?”

“It may be some time before he can walk, and I have a campsite hidden not far from here.”

“Just give me a sec,” You say.

You push yourself up into a sitting position, using Karkat for support. With his help you start to undo your armor. With every piece removed, you lose another good five to ten pounds of weight and movement becomes easier and easier.

“This shit weighs half what I do on its own,” you explain. “I think it would be better to just not for a while.”

"Now, please," Karkat asks, clearly exasperated, "Can you fucking tell me what's going on?!"

Karliah summarizes what just happened as you work on moving. By the time she's finished you're able to take a few wobbly steps forward if you use the wall for support.

“Perhaps my poison was not as powerful as I thought,” Karliah says.

Karkat shrugs. “Nah. He’s just a freak.”

“Hey!”
“Am I wrong?”

“…No.” Not that you like hearing it…

“See?” He gives a wave of dismissal. "Super resilient, stupid fast healing. I’m not sure if it’s the ancestral magic thing or the dragonborn thing or just that his family has been bred for adventuring like oxen are bred to pull-"

Could he pick another fucking time? “Oh, come on!”

“Tell me I’m fucking wrong.”

He's not but… “Well that comparison was a bit unwarranted.”

His face falls, hopefully meaning he realized he was kind of being a dick. "But um, the point is that John’s tough. Any normal person would probably still be drooling on the floor.”

“I see… It almost makes me wish I would have taken the shot at Aranea, then.”

“Wait, her name is Aranea too?” you ask.

“Of course, what else would it be?” Karliah lifts and eyebrow.

“Have you seriously missed the whole ‘dunmer name their oldest kids after themselves’ pattern?” Karkat says.

You blink.

“Come on, the Peixes did it, the Captors did it, my dad did it.”

“It’s fairly standard practice among our people,” Karliah says.

“I guess I never really thought about it before,” you admit. "But what do we do now?”

“Well, my initial plan had been to go to Riften with Aranea as my prisoner and have her stand trial for what she has done to the guild. But now that she’s escaped things will be a bit more… complicated.”

“Do we have any leads to go on?” Karkat asks.

“Well,” she says, “there’s this.” She pulls out a small black leather-bound volume.

You sit back down beside Karkat and look at the book. “What is that?”

“This was Gallus Desidenius’s journal. He was the guild master before he was betrayed and murdered. I believe this may hold important clues about what to do next.”

“You believe?” Karkat demands, “So you haven’t actually looked?”

“Well,” She opens it. A strange script is scrawled across the page. “I can’t exactly read this.”

“So what do we do?”

“If there’s anyone who can decipher this code, it’ll be Enthir at the Mage’s College in Winterhold. The two of them were long time friends and close allies.”

“We’re heading there right now!” You exclaim.
Karliah smiles. “Well, that’s fortunate. Perhaps I haven’t lost all of the Serket luck after all. Please take this and show it to him. Speak to no one else about this. If Aranea finds out where you are, she will likely try to have you killed.”

Karkat sighs. "Nothing new there, then. Add one more to the list."

"At least it means we're getting something done," you say, slipping the journal into one of your pouches.

"I guess…" Karkat mumbles.

"Hey," you put a hand on his shoulder. "We'll get to Winterhold, and then we're gonna be fine."

He nods, but you get the feeling he doesn't believe you.
I call this one "John continues to have a rough week and the campaign gets weird because an npc got a nat 20 on an arcane knowledge check and shit gets meta."

Meaning this chapter and from here on may contain actual spoilers for the webcomic.

By the time John recovers enough to keep moving it's already late. Karliah decides that she wants to go with you to Winterhold, so the three of you set up camp in the final room.

You're still not sure exactly what to make of her. She seems nice enough but, again, Serkets, so you have to be careful not to tell her anything you'll regret. John's still really quiet, which leads you to believe he still feels like shit. So you all go to bed early and agree to leave first thing in the morning.

It's mercifully clear when you get out of the ruins, though the glare off of the snow makes you shield your eyes. Thankfully, as the sun gets higher and higher over the horizon it becomes easier to deal with.

Karliah seems to be entirely focused on what's happened to the guild, and since you don't know that much she keeps needling you with all of these weird detail-focused questions that sometimes maybe one of you will remember. No, sorry, you actually can't say how many objects are in the cabinet of curiosity. You're never in the cistern long enough to look. But at least it turns out you were right about those little caverns in the Ragged Flagon – at one time there were merchants in there. Karliah says their absence is "an obvious indicator of something foul." As opposed to, you know, competition from all the new bandit groups because of the war.

But you keep that insight to yourself. It might start a fight, and getting into yelling matches makes John uncomfortable, and you're still not sure he's back at 100%. He's still just so damn quiet! Ugh, if only Karliah wasn't here you could just ask him about it, and then press him for an hour until he admits to having feelings.

Still, you make pretty decent time to Winterhold. You stop at the general store to sell a couple trinkets you picked up in Snow Veil Sanctum and then head to the inn for a bite to eat.

"Hey," John says, nudging you gently. "Isn't that Enthir over there?"

You turn and look. "Huh. That was easy." So the two of you get up and go over to him.

"Can I help you?" he asks, tone clearly implying that he didn't want to.

"Yeah," John says. "I know you're usually the guy that gets provisions for the college, but didn't Kanaya say something about you being a linguist too?"

He sighs and takes a long draught from his mug. "Probably. Or else you heard it from someone else. What do you want translated?"
"This." He pulls out the diary and hands it to him.

Enthir opens it with a bored expression on his face, but as soon as he reads the first line he narrows his eyes and pulls the book closer. "Where did you get this?"

"What does it say?" You ask instead.

"I don't know. I can read a lot of dead languages, but Falmer... that's a tough one."

"Wait, is that what that is?" You peer over the top of the journal.

"Pretty sure. It's been a while since I've done anything with Falmer, but there's no other script quite like it." He closes the book and hands it back to John. "I do have some notes in my room back in the college. If you want to head up there and take a look, I charge twenty septims an hour."

"Come on," you scoff. "We're part of the college."

"Fine. Eighteen."

"Fifteen."

"Seventeen," he counters.

You think about it for a moment. Yeah, you're probably not gonna get any better. Hopefully Karliah will pay you back anyway. "Deal."

"Alright, let me just pay my tab, and we'll see what I still have."

John goes back over to your table. "He's willing to help us!" he says excitedly.

"Praise be to Nocturnal," Karliah says with a sigh. "What does it say?"

"He doesn't know yet." You sit back down. "His stuff is back up in the college."

"Oh." Karliah looks down at her stew. "I am afraid I'll need to ask another favor of you, then."

"What?" You ask. "You followed us all the way here but you're not gonna actually go to the college?"

"I-" she lowers her voice. "It does not strike me as wise to be in such a conspicuous place. One more wanderer in this tavern will turn no heads, but a magicless Dunmer trying to go to the college would. I will remain here for now, but please, once he is done translating the book, bring it back to me."

John nods. "We can do that."

Enthir strides over to you, fastening his cloak. "Well then, gentlemen, shall we?"

"Yeah," you say. "Let's go."

He leads you up to the second floor of the tower. Enthir's room is littered with books and papers. A large chart depicting several alphabets is tacked to the wall. There are also piles of crates stacked up at the foot of the bed, the boards placed too tightly together for you to guess at what's inside.

"Alright," he says. "Take a seat. This might take me a while."
"You and John look at each other and each grab one of the crates.

"Like I said," Enthir continues, searching through shelves and drawers, "I think about twelve or thirteen years ago I did some work with a nord woman. She wanted help trying to get a foothold into learning the language, so I taught her some tricks. Is that- no, that says Aldmer and I just wrote it funny. Now she had a piece that had the same thing written in the Dwemer and Falmer languages. Problem is I can't remember how much of the research she took with her."

"If she's got it, can we just go talk to her?" You ask.

"You could, if you could find her. I know she was planning on heading to Raldbthar after she left, but that was over a decade ago. If she's still alive, the odds of her still being there are slim and if she's dead she's not going to be any help. And she didn't talk about herself much. No idea where she was from or where she'd go back to." He pulls out a book and quickly flips through it. "Oh, here we go. Looks like it was fourteen years ago, actually." he clicks his tongue. "Now, that's no good. It says here that she brought the copy of the engraving we used and took it away with her again."

"So that's it?" John asks.

Enthir shrugs. "Well, unless you somehow happen to have a copy of that same etching on you. Or you're willing to trek all the way to Markarth to make a new one."

John perks up. "Wait, this was from Markarth?"

"We spent like two weeks under the city," you say. "Did you write down where in the ruins it was? We could go back and-"

"We might not even have to!" John pulls out his journal and flips back a couple of months. "While you were doing your exploring, I got kind of bored and I found this cool looking part of the wall so I did an etching because I thought maybe Jake would be interested but I kept forgetting to send it to him. Here it is!" He untucks a loose sheet of paper and begins to unfold it. Inside you see two neat columns written in very different scripts.

"By the eight…" Enthir says. "That's exactly it!" He takes it from him and sets it on the desk. "So if we use this and look back at the notes, I should be able to- Hang on, this isn't even proper Falmer. They just used the alphabet as a code!" He begins furiously scribbling on a blank piece of paper.

"Uh, hey," you say, looking at his notebook. "Is there any way I could copy some of that research when you're done? I kind of have this thing…"

"Sure, just give me a few hours to be done with this." He looks up. "John, you said you were an apprentice, right?"

"Here? Yeah."

"Why don't you go down to his room and wait for a while. Getting disturbed makes me go slower, and given how stingy your friend was being earlier I'm guessing you wouldn't want that."

You frown. You'd kind of wanted to watch and figure out how he was doing this. But before you can open your mouth, John agrees for both of you and leaves.

"Was there something else?" Enthir asks, looking up at you out of the corner of his eye.
You're about to say no, but then you have a thought. "You said she didn't talk much about herself, but she had to have told you her name, right? The nord woman?"

"She did. It started with a K... Karen? Kalia?" He flips through the pages. "Oh, right, Katya. Never mentioned a last name, though."

For a moment you forget to breathe. "T-thanks." you say. "I better go now."

"You know her, kid?"

"Not really." You decide to say. You close the door and start heading downstairs.

By the time you get to the apprentices quarters, John's already got his breastplate off and is starting to take stock of your supplies.

He looks at you with concern. "You okay, dude?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." Taking off armor is probably a good idea. There's no reason you can't put normal clothes on now that you're in the college. You start undoing your bracers.

"You sure? Because you've got that kind of hundred-yard stare going on."

You close your eyes for a moment. I am. It's just... I think maybe the person who was here a before, the one Enthir worked with for a while, I think that might have been my mom."

John gasps. "Oh wow! That's really exciting!"

"Thanks. I think. I'm just not sure how to take it." You start working on your boots. "I'd always just assumed she was dead. And I don't know for sure it's her, but how many Katyas do you think are out there studying Falmer?"

"I mean, it's not that common of a name," John points out. "So we might be able to find her. Oh, that would be so cool!"

"Thanks. I think. I'm just not sure how to take it." You start working on your boots. "I'd always just assumed she was dead. And I don't know for sure it's her, but how many Katyas do you think are out there studying Falmer?"

"I mean, it's not that common of a name," John points out. "So we might be able to find her. Oh, that would be so cool!"

"Would it, though?" you kick one boot off. "I mean, if she was alive a decade ago and went to Raldbthar, that means she walked right by Windhelm and didn't bother to contact anyone. If she's still alive now that means she's gone almost twenty years without giving enough of a fuck about any of us to say a damn thing."

"Or maybe she was too ashamed at having left you alone for so long."

"Or maybe she was just a bitch!" you growl.

"Karkat!"

"What?! It's not like I'm talking shit about your mother!"

"Still, if you can't know for sure-"

"I can still be upset about it! You know it doesn't actually kill you, right? Being angry about things?"

He rolls his eyes at you. "Oh gods, not this again. I thought we settled this. You like being prickly and loud, I like not accidentally blowing things up."

"Yeah," you grumble to yourself in Dunmeri, "and the best way to get around that is to suppress
"Karkat, come here for a sec." He holds his arms out. You pull shut the curtain that separates this chamber from the rest of the tower before sitting down next to him and letting him wrap his arms around you. "You're gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay. Also, I think my Dunmeri is getting better because I understood like a little over half of that!"

"Rest of it was probably idioms," you grumble.

He just scratches the top of your scalp. Stupid John learning that stupid trick and making you stupid melt. At least you had the foresight to close the damn curtain.

"Hey, Karkat?" he asks you after a moment.

"Yeah?"

"You do still like me, right?"

You pull away to look at him in confusion. "Why wouldn't I?"

"It's just," he nibbles the inside of his cheek, "the way you were talking to Terezi. And then Karliah. And now this."

"The way I was talking to Terezi and Karliah…" you repeat slowly. "I mean, with Terezi I know there were probably some inside jokes you didn't get, but…"

"More like all the times you kept calling me an idiot. Or comparing me to a dog or farm animals. Or making fun of putting parts of my armor on over robes."

You just stare at him for a moment. Why would that mean you didn't like him?

"I mean, I get that you downplay liking things almost as much as I play down not liking things, but I feel like it was a little unnecessary to act that much like a dick."

Realization clicks in your brain. "Oh Azura, you just don't do that…"

"What? Call you out? Because I feel like I should be allowed to call you out."

"What? No, that's fine. This whole time I just thought you were extra guarded because of the politics stuff, but you just- Huh, I wonder if the Nords are actually like that too and are slightly less dickish than we always assumed…"

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh fuck, you must think I'm a total asshole. It's- Gods, how do I even say this? Okay, so think for a second about how I talk to Sollux and Terezi and Kankri and sometimes Kanaya and basically everyone else I'm close to with the exception of my dad."

"Okay?"

"So, unless you haven't-" No, don't put it negatively. "I mean, we all insult each other constantly."

John ponders it for a moment and then says, "Huh, you're right."

"Yeah, because it's just a thing you do with people you like."
He balks at you. "What? Why the hell would you do that?"

"Because if people don't mention what's wrong with you, it means that either they don't know you that well or they're ignoring your faults to suck up to you and you probably shouldn't really trust them because they want something," you say matter-of-factly.

He stares flatly at you. "Karkat, that makes no fucking sense."

"See? And this is why I get confused! Because you do things like that!"

"Oh… Yeah, I can kinda see that. Wait, does that mean you don't trust your Dad either?"

"No, because he's like… Oh wait, this is probably why there's no word in Cyrodiilic for this. Huh. Okay, so the word is seriaitrh, which literally also means immune. And I guess you can kind of use it literally, but there's other kinds of connotations. I guess it's kind of like authority but softer."

"Authority but softer?" he asks incredulously.

"Okay, that probably wasn't the best way of saying it. Maybe someone you respect? But no, you kind of respect people on your level too. Anyway, it's anyone in your family who’s at least thirty years older than you or just someone who takes care of you. So you can still be close, but you kind of keep the things you don't like about them quiet and only say shit when you're alone together."

John looks at you for a few seconds and you can see the cogs turning in his head. Then he sighs and slumps back a little. "Actually, everything is kind of starting to make sense. It explains why you kept insisting you were friends with people it seemed like you hated."

"Yeah. And basically because you would still call me a dork or weird and call me out on my shit when we were alone, I figured you just had 'be a fucking suck up' hammered into you your whole life so you wouldn't piss off the wrong noble."

"No. I mean, general politeness stuff, yeah and sometimes friends give each other a hard time, but nothing that extreme." He fiddles with the hem of his robe. "Do you think you'd be able to stop doing it? Your buddy-insulting me to other people thing, I mean."

"I can try. But feel free to smack me or yell at me when I fuck it up."

He sighs. "Oh, Stendarr…"

"Or, uh, give me a look? I don't know. Whatever you'd be comfortable with that gets my attention because I am totally going to do it without thinking about it and it's gonna be hard to get me to stop if we only get back to it later. Like, I do not remember calling you a dog in the last couple days. I believe you that I did, but I couldn't tell you when."

"Okay. I'll, uh, think of something."

You embrace him tightly and then go back to peeling off your armor. The air feels lighter somehow, and whenever you catch John's eye he always smiles back at you.

You and Karkat have changed, sorted your stuff, and are about to head upstairs to bother Enthir when someone pauses in front of the curtain.

"Knock, knock." Kanaya says.

You reach forward and pull back the curtain.
"Are you okay?" Karkat asks. "You look a little tired."

She gives him a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m alright. Things have just been a bit… hectic around here recently.”

"Nice of you to come by, then," he says. "Surprised you took time out of your busy meddling schedule to see us."

"Ah, see, you are one of my meddling appointments. The archmage wishes to speak with you."

“What does she want to see us about?” You ask.

“-Because we’ve got some questions too, and we didn’t trek half way to Valenwood to be sent on another fetch quest,” Karkat adds.

“Your questions will be answered too, I’m sure.” Kanaya replies with exasperation. “It’s all connected. So ridiculously complexly connected. Now please, follow me.”

“That sounds like a lot of vague mage bullshit,” Karkat grumbles.

“I fully agree. This is absolutely bullshit of the vaguest order. Yet, this is our lot in life it seems.”

“You’re not helping,” says Karkat.

“I know. But now you are beginning to understand my frustration. I love my wife dearly, but sometimes those with clairvoyance can be a bit difficult to deal with.”

You skirt around the edge of the courtyard before entering the other tower. Kanaya unlocks the side that houses the archmage’s quarters and you ascend.

The layout has changed a little bit since the last time you were there. More curtains have been strung up, blocking off the entire right side of the room. On the left, a large round table has been set up with seven chairs. Balled up parchment, discarded quills, and hoards of empty bottles (mostly potion, but some alcohol) are scattered across the floor.

Only four of the chairs at the table are occupied, and a massive tome lays upon it. The archmage sits facing the door and beckons you in. Kanaya confidently strides over and takes a seat at her right hand. The others turn to look at you. They’re all vaguely familiar, but you can’t quite place it. There’s something especially uncanny about the man to the archmage's left, but you are almost certain you’ve never met him before.

“Wait,” Karkat says. “Dave? Dirk? The fucking hell are you doing here?”

“We told you we’d be here, man.”

“I think that bit about Rose being our sister might have gone right over his head,” Dirk says. “I mean, you’d’ve thought that the whole reddish eyes, sleeping during the day, deathly pale, pointy teeth, super powerful in magic, never eating thing might have given it away that she was a vampire. And our uncanny family resemblance thing should have probably sealed the deal, but nope.”

“You’re probably right.” Dave shrugs. “I always did give both of ‘em too much credit.”

“What are you talking about?” You ask. “I-um I think I’m probably still missing something here.”

“More than you know,” the archmage says. She shuts the book, and you see it’s that same one you
picked up from the people trying to raise Potema. You’d recognize that strange flower-like symbol anywhere.

You suddenly question why you feel so certain you’d recognize it. And how you’re so sure Dave is Dave and Dirk is Dirk. Maybe you did meet before? Or this is weird dragonborn shit? Most of the stuff in your life that is new and makes no sense is dragonborn shit.

“Have a seat, boys,” the last person at the table pats the chair beside her and smiles, showing off her fangs. “By the way, nice to meet you, I’m Roxy.”

“Uh, hi.” You sit down next to her.

The longer you look at her—any of them, really, the more you start to feel something. You can’t quite place it. It’s like trying to recall the details of a dream after you’ve just woken up. The harder you try to grasp it, the more it slips through your fingers.

“Get comfortable,” Rose says. “It’s a long, long story.”

“Maybe it’s long if you tell it,” Roxy says. “You can probably leave out a lot of the details. All they gotta know is we were born in four hundred and—uh—sometime in the fifth century of the first era. We got turned at a pretty young age and every vampire older than us wound up dying off or went completely bonkers, so we got put in charge of underworldy magicy things, and here we are.”

“Wait, first era?” You ask. “What?”

“Oh, come on, you know.” Dave says. “The part where people actually started giving a fuck about dates, except for we weren’t important so no one told us about it, which is part of why it’s all kind of foggy for the first century or so.”

“Except for that I’m the oldest,” Dirk says. “Shit’s important.”

Dave scoffs. “Yeah right. That’s been such a small amount of time compared to how long we’ve been alive that it doesn’t matter.”

“Dave just says that because he’s the baby,” Roxy whispers loudly.

“I’m only a couple weeks younger than Rose and if we include time travel—” Dave starts.

“But how?!” You demand.

“Well you see, normally you get the stories about mommies and daddies who love each other very much, but in our case the daddy was a total asshole and the mommies were—”

“I’m pretty sure he meant the first era thing,” Karkat says, helpfully cutting Dirk off.

“I mean,” the archmage says, shrugging. “we are vampires. You can’t very well age if you’re already dead.”

You were kind of expecting an info dump, but this is still hard to swallow.

"You knew about this?!” Karkat demands, looking pointedly at Kanaya.

Kanaya rolls her eyes and pulls back her cheek, showing off her fangs. "I see noticing subtlety is still not a strong suit of yours."
"How long?" He asks.

"If you recall, I told you Rose saved me three years ago. All that she had to do was ensure the illness killed me before I bled out. And she's quite good at that."

Karkat gapes at her.

"You're too kind, my love," Rose says. "But none of that is particularly important at this moment. My siblings and I, individually or in some combination, have been in many adventures where the fate of the world has hung in the balance. But all of that was just prelude, practice and buildup for the things that are yet to come. Perhaps it is akin to the exploring and discoveries the two of you have thus far completed in your comparatively much shorter lifetimes. It was the domestication of the sheep and subsequent spinning of the woolen thread that was to be woven into the tapestry of—"

"For fuck's sake, Rose, we got a deadline here," Dave says. "Look, we ain't just saving this world. We're taking our shattered little piece of reality and trying to guide it back into place so that the entirety of existence can not have never existed."

"What." It's not even a question from Karkat. Just a flat, inflectionless "I am lost and this is bullshit" kind of what.

Rose sighs. "I have the feeling that confusion has little to do with that horrendous double negative. Look, shall we just show them?" A ball of golden light fills her hands.

"As long as we can agree on the abridged version. No one has time for all of that bullshit," Dave says.

"Well, if we succeed in our little endeavor, they'll get to know the full version better than any of us could ever tell. So fine."

"Awesome."

The other three summon balls of energy similar in size and texture to the one the archmage has, but Dave’s is red, Dirk’s is pink, and Roxy, to your surprise, actually seems to be holding pure blackness. The orbs rise up together and fuse before exploding out.

The table remains but the rest of the room is gone. You sit in the midst of the night sky, stars in every direction forming constellations you’ve never seen before. But if you look hard enough you can see the stone wall. So you haven’t moved; it’s just an illusion. Karkat and Kanaya look around in astonishment. The symbol on the cover of the book glows pale green.

"Now, let’s begin," the archmage says.

She moves her hand and you fly through the stars. You soon begin approaching a yellowish one, and as you get closer you see several small dark bodies zooming around it. The target seems to be the third one out: a marbled sphere that’s a weird combination of blue, brown, green, and white with a single whitish thing going around that.

"John," she says. "Welcome home."

"Huh? Is that supposed to be Nirn? 'Cause you're missing a moon, I think."

"No," Rose says softly. "So do you remember that part about this being a shard of reality?"

"Yeah," you reply, "and I didn’t get it then either."
“Alright, what I’m going to tell you might be kind of difficult for you to deal with. This world – you and us and everything in it – is at the same time both very real and very not real.”

“Okay,” you say flatly. “Meaning what, exactly?”

“Meaning that this is one version of what can happen, what did happen. But it’s not the primary one. This is.” She reaches up and taps the bluish sphere. It ripples when she makes contact. “And our entire eternity will happen for that world in a split second, tangential and having minor but long-reaching effects.”

“What? Is this supposed to give us more reason to try to stop Alduin?” Karkat asks. “Because saving this world is motivation enough, thanks. We kind of live here.”

“It’s not just for that,” Dave says. “See, here’s where it gets complicated. Obviously, this” he gestures around, ”is our universe, where, as you put it ‘we kind of live.’ But that,” he points up, “is also our universe. And that’s the main one, where the main versions of us live.”

“So what? Are you saying we’re not really real?” Karkat asks, voice strained. “Because I don’t know, I feel pretty real.”

“No,” he answers. “We’re real, and we do matter. But we matter the way a tree matters in a forest, or a person matters in a country. Which is to say most people aren’t gonna notice, but we have to be there.”

“Why?” You ask.

“So we’ll come back to that. Willing to suspend your disbelief for a sec and go along with us?”

You and Karkat look at each other. “Alright,” you finally say.

“Good.”

Rose waves her arms and the orb stops spinning. It grows bigger and bigger until you’re in a strange room filled with bizarre contraptions. In the middle of the room stands a boy and he-

“Wait a minute,” you say. “He looks like I did when I was a kid.”

“That’s because he is you!” Roxy says excitedly. “Or, I guess to be more correct, you’re him. That version came first.”

“But I don’t remember ever-“

“Of course you don’t.” Rose says. “Again, our world – our entire universe is just one permeation of his. And we will come back to that. Now, let us begin.”

They take it in turns to narrate or change the scene to fit what they’re trying to tell, and honestly switching between them can be jarring as fuck. Sometimes they leave things paused so they can explain shit, sometimes they allow the scene to unfold on its own when you really wish they would tell you what's happening. Sometimes they jump to completely unrelated bullshit for seemingly no reason.

You have never heard this story. You’ve probably heard hundreds of ballads and read even more, but nothing has ever been like this. Not really. It’s stupidly complicated and makes no sense, and some things seem like they’re going to be important aren’t and some things that seem super
insignificant come back out of nowhere.


And if you buy into their shit it has every reason to be. You're just not sure you do. Okay, John and a lot of your friends are fucking uncanny, but you’re pretty sure that can’t actually be you because you would have killed yourself out of shame before you hit puberty. But you can’t help but feel something tugging at the back of your mind.

You watch as people die. You watch as the survivors come together and fight their final battle, as they kill the evil queen and the dog demon, but they cut away before the green monster is actually dead. Instead, most of you are just sitting in front of this big door. John reaches out for the door and then-

Abruptly, the lights and the show fade and the illusion recedes and you’re back in Winterhold.

“Well, what the fuck happens next?” You demand. “That can’t be it.”

“Maybe not,” Rose says, "But that's all we can see. Working together, at the peak of our abilities and sitting on ten thousand years of magical experience, this is the best vision we can get of that world."

"And what exactly are we supposed to take away from that?" You demand.

"So there's two things that happen." Dirk says. "First, that moment is a kind of singularity. You remember that stuff near the end, about ultimate selves? I know it went kind of fast, but shit’s important. There’s hundreds and hundreds of Johns and Karkats out there. Some of them contribute more to the final product than others, sure, but every single one matters. And right then all of them that had existed up until that point come together. That's what's supposed to happen."

"It's difficult for one accustomed to a signular existence to comprehend this sort of collective and contradictory truth,” Says the Arch- you guess you should probably start calling her Rose since apparently you apparently were… are? friends. Azura fuck this is confusing!

“And second? I'm guessing something about the singularity’s gonna be wrong because you said 'supposed to.'” You say.

“Ding, ding, ding! Ten points for Karkat!” Roxy says.

"Yeah." Dave runs his fingers through his hair. "We're not sure exactly how, but we're pretty sure it had something to do with the house flipping around. But whatever did it, as soon as everything came together it shattered into millions of pieces, a million different worlds and timelines that are all kind of independent but also kind of not. Uh… reverse causality is hard to explain without you knowing a whole lot time magic shit."

John speaks up. "So basically what you're saying is this is just one of those splinter worlds."

You just stare at him blankly. Is he seriously going along with this?

Roxy smiles. "Yes!"

"Okay, but what does that mean?"

"Well," Rose starts, "I believe that if we do everything right, we may be able to help guide our universe back into place. And if things go as they're meant to in all of the worlds, perhaps that will
“do something to help restore a grander order.”

“And how are we supposed to do that?”

“By beating English,” Dave says. “Every single time.”

You groan. “Okay. My bullshit meter can only go so high. None of this makes any fucking sense! I’m not sure what kind of skooma you’ve all been snorting instead of drinking like a normal person, but seriously. You’re all saying that we’re not just ourselves. We’re just some little piece of the people who actually matter. This entire thing, our entire existence is just one giant masturbatory effort that buttresses some other assholes that just happen to look like us. How the fuck did you come up with this shit anyway?”

“Well,” Rose says, “heart and time both have to do with alternate or pieces of selves. We’ve spent centuries honing our natural abilities, albeit with the stricter rules placed upon us by this universe, and with Dave and Dirk using their magic and Roxy and myself doing analysis, our research has given us perhaps a better understanding of the nature of this nonsense than anyone else.”

You shake your head. “You’re not actually gonna help us, are you? It’s just more cryptic bullshit with weird-ass magic you claim to have access to that no one else can touch. Fucking mages, knew we shouldn’t have come.” You stand up. “Look, if you’ve got nothing to help us kill Alduin I’m out of here.”

“We are planning to help you,” Rose stresses. “Defeating English- or I suppose he goes by Alduin here – but either way, defeating him is the most important thing for anyone to do in this universe.”

“Plus, like I said before, we’re on a schedule,” Dave adds. “For this to work, we need to gather all eight ex-humans, the twelve ex-trolls, kill him on the thirteenth of Rain’s Hand.”

“Why that day?” You demand. “Let me guess, it’s the fucking arc numbers which are sooo important.”

“Um, actually, Yeah.” Dave says. "That’s the day English was killed in the main timeline, it’s when we have to do the same here.”

“Well,” John says, “we talked to Pyralspite, who is the dragon leading the greybeards, and she says that the only way to defeat him is using a shout that some ancient nords came up with. We need to go back in time to find out what it is.”

You stand. "Come on, John, really? Let's just go.”

He shrugs but stays seated. "We were gonna ask them for help killing Alduin anyway. From where I'm standing it doesn't look like changes what we need to do, it just throws on another reason for doing it and makes it so they're more likely to help us."

"And we can be quite helpful," Rose says. "Especially since it seems you need to travel through time, and that's Dave’s specialty," Rose says. She turns to him. “Is that something you can accomplish?”

He shakes his head. “To the Merethic era? Nah. I can only go to times where I actually existed. Besides, you probably don’t want to really be there. The butterfly effect at a pivotal moment like that has got to be something awful. It’s more like… we need a vision? But I’m a knight, not a seer.”

“So then what do you think we should do?” she asks.
“We could try using an Elder Scroll,” John says. “That’s what Pyralspite said we need to get, anyway.”

“Hey Rose, you got one of them in your secret occult library?” Roxy asks.

“Sadly, no. I do keep many dangerous tomes, hidden from demons and daedra, but none can hold an Elder Scroll.”

Well fuck.

“But I do know where one is.”

Whoop-de-fuckin-do.

“Where?” John asks, voice full of excitement. Yeah, okay, it’s another fetch quest, and it’ll probably be through a bunch of draugr or something, but at least it’ll be something really worth getting this time. Probably.

“In Blackreach.”

You perk up at the word. Going to Backreach changes things. You sit back down. “Can you tell us how to get there?”

“I can and I will.”

Huh, looks like this trip might be worth something after all.

Rose pulls out a map of Skyrim. “Most of its entrances are locked from the inside, but there’s one ruin where you can still enter right here. If you get your map out I can mark it for you. It’s quite nearby, but I suppose on a cosmological scale it’s all fairly cl-”

But Rose doesn’t get to finish her statement. From below there’s a massive explosion. You all look at each other and run down the stairs.

The doors to the hall of the elements have been blown open. One hangs loosely on one hinge, and the other has been blasted into the courtyard. The eye of Magnus is gone.

You hear soft groaning from just next to the hall’s entrance and see that Tolfdir is lying on the ground, clutching his side. Strange green material clings to his robes.

Rose kneels down beside him. “What happened here? Who did this?”

“Scratch.” He coughs. “He came in here and started a spell. There was a massive wave of energy and then he was gone, taking the Eye of Magnus with him.”

“Gone where?” She demands.

“I- I don’t know. I’m sorry, my lady. I’m so tired…”

“Shit! Anyone who isn’t awful at magic come help me with this! We need to see if we can heal him!”

John all but stumbles over himself, a healing spell at the ready, but Roxy and Kanaya get there first.

“So what do we do now?” You ask. “We can’t just let him have that thing. It’s way too powerful to
give to the Thalmor.”

“Well, that’s the eye of Magnus,” John says. "And we figured out where the staff of magnus was. Maybe that’ll help. We could go and-”

“No,” Dave says. “Whatever Scratch is doing, it’s not as important as stopping English. This is probably just a distraction. Besides, it looks like the three of us will be staying up here for a while. You head to Blackreach. We’ll work on finding the eye and staff. Now take this.” He hands you a small whistle.

“The fuck is that?” you ask.

“It’s a whistle.”

“Well duh!”

“It’ll summon a big black bird. If you attach a letter to it, it’ll find its way back to me. It’s faster and safer than a courier with all this shit going on. Now get out of here. Find the Elder Scroll. We’ll be in touch.”

John nods solemnly and attaches the whistle to your belt. “Let’s go.”

“Hang on a second,” You say.

“What?”

“It’s like ten at night. I know you’re high on excitement right now, and so am I, but as soon as we get fifteen minutes out of Winterhold we’re gonna collapse like a sweetroll without flour. And we need that journal from Enthir.”

“Oh yeah…”

“And they need the tuning sphere and lexicon if they want to actually get the damn thing,” Rose says.

Kanaya has Tolfdir leaning on her shoulder and is helping him towards the door.

“Go get some sleep,” Rose says. “We’ll wake you up and give you the supplies you need tomorrow before we turn in for the day.”

You nod and leave the hall. John follows in your wake, but you can feel reluctance. He still wants to go immediately. Because of course he does. You just take his hand, rub the back of his knuckles, and remind yourself not to call him an idiot or overly excitable.

Between learning about that and how to get to Blackreach, it looks like you got something useful out of today after all.
Chapter 18

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

Chapter Summary

holy shit, it's finally a chapter where I didn't add a whole new scene that wasn't in the original. Probably because it was already 20 pages. Oops. NSFW below

TIRDAS 24TH SUN’S DAWN, 4E202

WE SET OFF JUST AFTER SUNRISE TODAY. WE MADE IT TO ALFTAND, BUT WE COULDN’T FIND THE WAY IN. IT SEEMS LIKE THAT’S A COMMON PROBLEM HERE. WE FOUND A DESERTED CAMP AND THERE WAS A HASTILY DRAWN MAP ABOUT TRYING TO GET THROUGH A CRACK IN THE GLACIER.

BY THE TIME WE FOUND THAT, IT WAS TOO LATE FOR US TO SET OFF INTO THE ACTUAL RUINS, SO WE JUST PICKED THROUGH THE THINGS THEY’D LEFT AND SET UP OUR OWN CAMP. JOHN’S GETTING A BIT TWITCHY, BUT IF BLACKREACH IS REALLY DOWN THERE WE DON’T WANNA SHOW UP EXHAUSTED, OR WE’LL BE DEAD BEFORE WE EVEN HAVE THE CHANCE TO KISS OUR ASSES GOODBYE.

Well, what can you say? When Karkat’s right, he’s right. In the morning light, it takes about five minutes to find the opening. It looks like your predecessors found it too. There’s lots of camping equipment just inside, but it looks like it’s been there for a while. Mold grows on the tent and the handle of their axe has rotted out.

As you continue, the ice cave gives way to dwemer ruins. The floors are completely covered in oil, and a few corridors are filled with a yellowish gas that reeks of sulfur. Karkat keeps his distance as you carefully send sparks flying forward. It’s a bit of a trick to get a ward up in time to shield yourself from the explosions. Your hair gets a little singed, but all the fire clears out the automatons pretty well.

Eventually you find your way into a wide, bright hallway lit by the greenish glow of dwemer lamps. Only the middle of the hall is solid, with brass beams coming off of either side of the cement to support it over a seemingly bottomless chasm. Ethereal steam floats up through the spaces in the floor. But knowing the dwemer, it’ll be solid enough.

You step forward but Karkat gently touches your arm. He points ahead, toward the end of the massive passage. You have to squint a bit, but then you see what he’s looking at. Ahead, in the corner, you see massive pile of black gunk with small glowing pieces embedded in it.

Chaurus eggs, enclosed with a chitin fence.

Ladies and gentlemen, you’ve hit falmer territory.
You’re a little more careful from then on, skirting the edge of the falmer villages when possible. There’s so many of them! The buildings look a bit bigger and more complicated too. You want to ask Karkat if he’s seen anything like this, but that would give you away. Instead you barely breathe, letting him take the lead and make the little growly noises that confuses them. But that means you have to stick closer to the chaurus pens. They look at you hungrily and your instincts are telling you to bash their faces in or run, but Karkat just turns them back when they get too close.

Like all Dwemer ruins, this one just goes on and on and on, but at least there’s a bit of variety here because this one also keeps going down and down and down. You figure that if this is the way into Blackreach it only makes sense. But, guh, this shaft goes on forever. Thankfully, you and Karkat manage to sneak past almost all of the falmer, and the few that notice you go down fast.

If it weren’t for the constant slope you’d swear you’re going around in circles. Yeah, you’re in a freaking mountain, but it didn’t look this big from the outside! Stupid dwemer. Eventually you hit a spiral ramp and then you are going around in circles. You walk, and walk, and walk. You can’t even tell how far you’re supposed to keep going because it’s just so damn dark you can’t see the bottom. Magelight can only help so much, and there’s no change in the air. After you get away from the light above, the humidity stays but the air turns cool.

You cast three or four dispel illusions, just to make sure that this isn’t a trap designed to keep you wandering forever. Eventually, Karkat snaps at you and you stop it. The two of you continue descending in silence.

Then all of a sudden the space opens up and your feet land on flat ground. Where they manage to get through the centuries of dust and filth, the flagstones glow so brightly you don’t even need magelight anymore. On the far end of the room, a dead centurion lays face down on the floor.

Well that’s odd. There’s an arrow sticking out of its neck, but it’s not falmer-made. You’d found notes and torches a ways in, but there had been no sign of the people that came before you for ages. You thought they’d turned around or been killed.

Karkat approaches carefully, as though he’s either expecting the centurion to come back to life or whoever killed it to ambush him. He gingerly places a hand on its body.

“Cold,” he says. “Ugh, and covered in dust. Whoever killed this thing did it a while ago.” He pulls the arrow out and narrows his eyes.

“What is it?” You ask, approaching him.

“This is a weird fucking arrow. Check this out.”

He hands it over, and turn it in your hands, confused. “I mean, it just looks elven to me.”

“Are you colorblind or something? It’s silver.”

You squint at it. You think you can kinda see what he’s saying, but it’s hard to be certain because the light is so weird. Okay, fine, one more magelight isn’t going to kill you. You cast the spell, making the room a little brighter. Well, now there’s no question about the color.

You take it from him and turn it over in your hands, examining the weight and strength of the metal. “White moonstone,” you say. “That’s really weird. But it always turns gold when you work it, right? So what does this mean?”

“Fuck if I know. Also, whoever used that thing is an amazing shot.” he pulls the core from the
automaton. It’s cracked right down the middle.

“I don’t like this.” You say. “I don’t know what we’re dealing with but-”

“Wow, you’re actually thinking before running into certain death with little or no information? You hit your head or something?” He throws the worthless core over his shoulder.

There’s a loud rumbling noise and the sound of hissing steam.

“Shit, what did you do?!” you demand.

Karkat draws his sickles and turns around. A piece of rock slides away, revealing another small chamber, containing a small pulpit-y thing and beyond that there’s a cylindrical platform with a lever in the middle.

“Huh, okay.” You say. “I think this is one of those lifts. Looks like we found a shortcut out!”

“How nice of the dwemer to include that,” Karkat says, rolling his eyes. “We’ve never seen a secret backdoor ever. Look at this instead.” he says, gesturing to the pedestal There’s a disk of aetherium embedded in it about the size of your hand. Yeah, it’s a big chunk of rock, but…

“What’s so special about it?”

“See this indent?” he asks. “I know it’s kind of small, but it looks like if something goes here it’ll activate. Maybe this is the way down.”

“So we need to find a key somewhere?”

“No.”

It’s shallow and hard to see with the way the material glows, but now that he mentions it, looks like there is a little cutout in the shape of a sideways 69.

“You think your necklace will fit in there?”

“I think maybe it will.” Karkat pulls the chain over his head and places the pendant down. It fits perfectly.

The aetherium begins to glow more brightly and light fills the chamber. You’re blinded for a moment, but you can hear the sound of stone grinding against stone. When your eyes adjust, there’s a spiral staircase behind Karkat, descending further still into absolute darkness.

“Awesome,” Karkat says. His voice is a little bit strained and it just keeps getting worse as he continues. “More stairs going even further down into the dark. How long until we pop out on the other side of the planet? Hey, maybe we’ll land in wherever the fuck the Akaviri came from and-”

You place a hand on his shoulder. “Karkat.”

“Oh come on, it’s just another dungeon and it’s not like any of the other ones haven’t been ludicrously long, or ridiculously deep or-”

“Just take a deep breath, okay?”

He huffs.

“Look, I know this is a big deal and you’re kind of freaking out. But it’ll be okay. Whatever’s
down there we’ll face it together, and we’ll find that Elder Scroll.”

“I know,” he snaps.

“I think… maybe you should tell me what you’re worried about. You know I’m not good at figuring that kind of stuff out.”

“Look, if this turns out to be anything you’ll know. It’s probably just going to be another dead end anyway.”

He swipes the amulet off of the pedestal.

…The amulet

“Oh! Does this have to do with your mom?”

He freezes. “I thought you just said you weren’t good at figuring this stuff out.” He puts the necklace back on and heads for the stairs.

“Karkat!”

He doesn’t answer and keeps walking.

“Karkat! Talk to me!”

He stops at the top of the stairs. “Do you want to get to Blackreach today or not?”

“I do, but-“

“Can’t believe I’m telling you this, but don’t worry about it. Let’s just fucking focus on what we’re doing.”

“Okay,” you say softly.

“Good.” He leads you down into the blackness.

Eventually you find a door. You reach out and press your hand to the seam and it swings open soundlessly, perfectly balanced in spite of its age.

“Holy shit,” Karkat breathes.

You were expecting one of two things: Either a barren cave, maybe some glowing fungus here or there with dwarven artifacts scattered around or more boxy broken ruins for you to find your way through. But no, this is actual wilderness. The dwemer ruins in the distance look big enough to be proper fortresses, the type of massive structures you see above ground. They’re dotted across the cave, which extends as far as the eye can see. There’s not much supporting the roof, just a few columns, and yet you can’t see a single crack. Though part of that might be the distance. It feels as high as the sky outside. Blue glowing mushrooms, taller than any tree, light the massive cavern. In the distance, you see a small sun suspended from the ceiling. A huge river flows nearby.

“It, uh, might be a little harder to find the elder scroll in here than I was banking on,” You say.

“I’m sure it’s not attached big obvious glowing orb of magic,” Karkat replies.

“I don’t know… I get the weird feeling it’s not there.”
"Well, there’s that tiny little outbuilding up ahead, maybe the arcane fabric of the universe is in there!"

"Maybe," You start walking forwards. "Can’t hurt to check!"

He groans. "We’re gonna be down here for months and completely miss the end of the world, aren’t we? We’ll pop back up and find nothing but the inky void of the empty cosmos.”

"Yeah, whatever. Help me pick this lock. We might find some clues about- well, there might be something cool in here.”

He huffs, but still comes forward. "I bet it’s just going to be like a campsite with a journal saying ‘oh hi, I’m a stupid mage who’s meddling with shit I shouldn’t!’ and then the next entry will say, ‘Huh, this isn’t going completely according to plan.’ And that’ll be right next to some skeletal remains.”

He opens the door and you find an abandoned cottage full of alchemy supplies with a tattered journal on the front table.

“Fuckin’ told you.” he says.

Then you get a closer look at the book and you’re stricken speechless.

“What’s wrong?” He asks.

“I think… I think maybe you should take a look at this.”

You create a ball of magelight. Where it’s written on the journal, Karkat’s symbol gleams silver.

6/12/183

On the off chance someone is to come across my writings, my name is Katya Sunheart of Windhelm. I’ve spent much of my life within the walls of this city, but tomorrow I leave forever.

I’ve been planning this journey for years. I thought I was ready to leave two years ago. My brothers had spread across Skyrim, my parents were already long buried, and I never cared for my husband. But since that time I have been my life has become some things have changed. I promised myself I wouldn’t let this become too emotional, but, suffice it to say, this last year has made that especially difficult. I must tear myself away before I become even more attached, or this work may never be completed.

Should this account ever return home, I am so sorry, my dearest ones. I pray you will grow to understand and forgive me for leaving. But this is my duty, a burden passed to me from my mother, from her mother, from her mother. Now I am the last daughter of the house of Sunheart, and I shall remain that way. And so it falls to me to complete this task. This journal shall serve as my personal record, but also, should I fail, perhaps it will find its way into the hands of someone who can do what no one of my clan ever could: protect and restore the snow elves.

You can’t believe it. Your hands shake as you trace the name, feeling the soft indent of a firm hand’s writing under your fingertips.

Sunheart. Your Dad was the only one who ever used that name. Everyone else still called her Cruel-Sea, even after everything that happened.
“Karkat? You okay?”

A drop of water falls onto the page, and you frantically wipe it away before it damages the page. Of course you’re crying. Good job, Vantas.

“C-can you leave me alone for a bit?”

“Karkat?”

“John, please. I need this.”

You must look like an absolute mess because his eyebrows scrunch up and he frowns just a bit. “I’ll, um, check out the areas right nearby.” He sends a small spark into a fireplace, and the old logs light right back up. “Yanno, get up a perimeter and stuff. If you need me, just shout, okay?”

You give him a curt nod and then go back to staring at the journal, reading the same words over and over again.

It isn’t until the he leaves and the door closes quietly that you can bring yourself to turn the page.

And then all you can do is read on and on as you reach out through words and time to try to connect to the mother you never really knew.

You’re not sure what to make of… well any of this, really. It’s gotta be important to Karkat, because it’s got that symbol from his necklace on it and his jaw dropped about three feet when he read that first line.

At least it’s peaceful out here. Yeah, you can see chaurus and falmer in the distance, but they’re too far away and they don’t seem to care about you. You plop down next to a large mushroom and stare out across the river.

Hey, maybe Karkat was right about that glowey orb. Can’t hurt just scouting the place out, right? You’ll be careful!

You leave your camping gear next to the mushroom and stealthily make your way towards the building and the orb. If nothing else, this should kill some time. Following the light is easy enough. All you have to do is keep half an eye on where you’re putting your feet, and the glowing orb guides you to a massive stone hall. You carefully sketch a map as you go, every now and then pausing under a glowing mushroom to double check your bearings. It’d be no good if you found the Elder Scroll but lost Karkat. That building where you left him was so small and unassuming…

Well, at least there wasn’t anything dangerous in there. And maybe it’s good that he’s taking a break. The poor guy just started crying without even noticing! What the heck was even in that book? Gosh, you hope he’ll tell you when you get back. Like, it’s well within his rights to keep a couple of secrets. But if you don’t find out it’s probably going to bug you forever.

You groan at yourself in frustration only to hear a gruff voice demand “The hell was that?!”

Shit! You weren’t expecting there to be people down here! You press back against the wall. The dampness from the stone clings to your shirt, but you don’t dare move. You don’t have your full armor, don’t have your partner. Yeah, you’re still an Egbert but you’d still rather not get into a fight to the death. After readying your magic you peek around the edge.

There’s a group of humans barely a stone’s throw away from you wearing nothing but rags. They
stand together beneath the light of the orb, tapping at a massive rock with chisels and pickaxes. Several falmer stand on the battlements above, holding spears and growling menacingly at the humans from behind their chitin masks.

Slavers.

You sit and wait. And wait. And wait. It would have been foolish to launch a direct assault. There’s too many falmer and too many innocent people who could be forced to fight against their will. You don’t want to hurt anyone if you can avoid it.

Eventually, the shift ends. A new group of slaves comes out into the yard, and the members of the old go their separate ways. Curiously, no one seems to care about the ones that wander out of the compound. Well, you guess it’s not like they’ve got anywhere else to go down here.

A nord woman leaves the fort alone, a large woven basket in her arms. You watch from a distance and then, when she’s far enough away, you follow. She stops along the river, reaching down to gather nirnroot.

“Hi!” you say, from far enough away not to startle her.

She still jumps, knocking her basket into the water.

“Who the fuck are you?!” She demands, pulling a knife.

“Shh! It’s okay! I’m here to rescue you!”

“What?” She lowers the blade slightly.

“Yeah! You and the rest of the slaves.”

She scoffs, putting he weapon back at her belt. “Look, I’m not sure where the hell you came from, but we all came here because we’d rather be laborers down here than on the block up there.”

“What do you mean?”

She spits on the ground. “Kid, it ain’t too confusing. Everybody who was down here was on death row. Then some lady shows up and gives us a choice: stay up and die or come down and live. The falmer don’t give a shit what we do as long as we spend a couple hours mining and don’t kill anyone. And even if we did escape, what the hell would we do? Be bandits? Fuck no. The pay ain’t that good, the living conditions suck, and you have the guards and bounty hunters breathin’ down your neck.”

“Oh.”

“Look, I’d suggest you get out of here. I’m a pretty nice girl - I was just in for running a skooma ring - but some of the other guys… Well, they might either want to make you an actual slave or else we got a couple fuckos who would enjoy killing someone they won’t get in trouble for killing.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

You swallow. Okay, yeah, maybe you should go. But before you do you have to ask. “What’s your name?”
“None of your business,” she growls.

“Okay…” you turn and start walking away. Karkat would want to know. You know he would want to know, just in case this woman happened to be his mom. But if you press her she might get some of those friends or the falmer. At least you can tell him that there are people down here and one might be-

“It’s Astrerd, though. Astrerd Fleetfoot. In case you’d need to know.”

“Astrerd,” you repeat to yourself. "Alright. Thanks.” As you walk away, every now and then you glance back until Astrerd and her section of river have faded back into the darkness.

7/03/184

It appears we’ve reached the last page of this volume. Thankfully some scraps of paper still remain. In the next few days I’ll need to make another book in which to keep my notes, both for posterity and to keep me sane in this darkness. I’m going to need a while to map this cavern and I refuse to return topside until I’m finished.

I’ve decided to make this small house in Blackreach my base of operations for now. I’m certain the dwemer and falmer information in this city will be invaluable in my search. I hope that someday I’ll be able to find that cure, that method of communication that may bring the snow elves back from the savages they’ve become.

I’ve locked all the doors I could find, trying to keep those who would abuse this knowledge out. Of course, my presence here is no longer a complete secret. I could bear it no longer, and I had to send a letter to Kankri, telling him where I was and what was happening. I wanted him to at least know I’m still alive. And I sent him a bit of gold to help care for the boys. It’s the least I can do for him.

My son has the amulet now as well. I now realize how likely it is that I will die out here in this wilderness, and even if I should fail this quest cannot be lost. My clan may be dying, but it shall do so with honor.

Part of me hopes that it is Karkat that finds this. He’s the only person who can make it through now, unless someone finds one of the lifts while I’m out. And then if I do fail, perhaps he will still be able to redeem us.

And if you are reading this, my dearest son, I love you. And I am so, so sorry.

You read. And read. And read. There’s no sun or stars down here to help you keep track of time, but it’s probably been a few hours if the candles burn like they do on the surface. It’s not that the journal is particularly long, or the handwriting particularly sloppy, but you feel the need to read each line a good two or three times before heading on.

You wish you knew what you were looking for. As it is, all you know is you want to find something that will make everything fall into place and for shit to make sense. But the further you get, the less you feel like you understand.

Not the restoring falmer thing. Like, you get that. You just can’t figure out why she chose to go out to try to do it when no one else did, and why she left when she did. It just seemed so damn obvious to her, like no one would ever question why she chose to fucking abandon you. And it sounds like she cares with that last paragraph, but she just wants you to pick up her fucking quest. With groan, you plop the book back on the table and lean back in your chair.
No, maybe the answer is obvious. She's a nord, so she has that stupid sense of clan honor. She just wanted to redeem herself for the fuck up that turned out to be you and thought taking responsibility for her ancestor’s mistakes would do it better than taking care of her own. "I love you," she wrote. Yeah right. You wish you'd never stumbled upon this stupid journal.

Fuck fate. Seriously, fuck it. Everything is happening at once and it’s all fate of a species, or Skyrim, or the world, or apparently all of time and space if you’re supposed to believe the vampires. It's one contrivance after another so why…

Why does this all have the audacity to feel right?

The door opens with a drawn-out creak. You don’t bother to go for your sickles. If everything is boiling down to fucking destiny you’re just gonna let it do what it will.

“Hey, I’m back.” John speaks gingerly, like he’s expecting you to explode on him.

And you know? Maybe you really should. None of this bullshit started happening before he entered your life. He brought in his “chosen one” fuckery. He made this complicated. He made you care more than you ever had before, and that’s saying something.

You whip around to face him, fully intent on giving him the chewing out he expects and deserves.

He looks… small. He stands uneasily, one arm crossed over his chest so he can grip the other. He’s leaning a bit to the side, barely meeting your eyes. His faded blue robes look even duller in the candlelight. Gods, even his eyes look washed out.

Without saying anything, you go to him and throw your arms up around his shoulders.

“Karkat?”

“Shhh. No words.”

You take a deep breath. His scent is mostly covered by the dust of dwemer ruins and the earth of the cave, but he still feels right in your arms. Strong and sturdy and yours. And, well, you’ve gotten used to filtering out the “haven’t bathed because adventuring” stench. You’re probably not much better off anyway.

You should let go. You still have some things you have to do. But he tips his head down and gently presses his temple to yours.

This probably is all his fault on some cosmic level. But you’d do this for him a thousand times over. You’re not sure if you're that dumb or if he's that good or both. Not like it really matters anyway.

He strokes your back softly and steps away. “Okay, I think it should be pretty safe here. Let’s get our stuff set up.”

Well, one of you had to state the obvious. “Right,” you reply.

He takes your hand and leads you out of the building. You take the time to enjoy having his hand in yours as you trek across the beautiful, bizarre landscape. The river’s close, so it doesn’t take long to get there.

“So I was thinking,” he starts.
What? Fuck, John, please don’t start anything now.

Thankfully, he doesn’t. “The water is actually a little warmer than the air, and it’s warmer in here than outside. This might not be a bad time to actually wash clothes and stuff.”

You glance around. You don’t see any huts or chaurus eggs or anything, but… “You sure it’ll be safe?”

He smiles. “Hey, I can do enough magic to get any random falmer to leave us alone.” With that, he lets go so he can undo his belt.

Well, one more distraction can’t be a bad thing. You unbuckle the pieces of your armor, removing layer after layer until you’re left in the shirt and leggings you wear underneath. John is still working on the wraps on his forearms that keep the cold air out of his sleeves.

“Want help?” You ask.

He sighs but obligingly holds out an arm. You easily untie the linen strips as he continues unwrapping the other side with his teeth, grumbling the whole time.

“Hey, you’re the one who decided that all this bullshit is necessary,” you say, scowling.

“Nuh-huh.” He drops the piece of fabric and shakes his arm so it unwinds the rest of the way. “It’s just how you’re supposed to wear them.”

“You’re lucky you’re cute,” you say, peeling off your tunic and kneeling next to the water.

You plunge the garment into the water and, wow, it really is warm. It’s a nice change from the last few times you’ve washed your clothes. It’ll go faster without having to take breaks to avoid frostbite.

John chatters on for a bit about where he’s been, where he thinks you guys should head next. He’s trying to dance around the journal issue, and you appreciate the effort even if he’s tripping up every now and then. So much for this being a distraction.

“It was my mom’s,” you finally say, cutting him off mid-sentence. “She kept a journal after she left.”

“Oh.”

“This one was the first year or so, so I have no idea where she is now and no way of telling if she’s even still alive. Apparently we’ve got this family legacy to try to restore the falmer or something? At least before I knew she was heading into Dwemer ruins, but if she finished here she could be anywhere in Tamriel.”

“Well, Falmer are only in Skyrim, so she’s probably still around somewhere!”

You shake your head. “I don’t even know what I’d do if I saw her. What I’d say, how I’d feel…” You pull your clothes from the water and plop them on the shore so you can bury your face in your hands.

“Karkat…” He wraps his arms around you. “I’m here, okay?”

“I know.” You clutch at his forearms and let him hold you.
Eventually, Karkat lets go of you and so you let go of him.

“Alright. Let’s do this,” he says.

“D-do what?” You ask.

He gives you a weird look and takes a few steps out into the river.

“Oh! Uh, right.” You follow him in, feeling like a complete fucking moron. He turns and starts washing.

The water’s actually pretty nice. And you feel like you could stick around a lot longer since it’s not quite hot springs-hot anymore. You wade in a bit deeper and sit down.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Karkat demands.

“It’s comfy.”

He looks at you like you’re crazy.

“No really, come over here.”

He comes out just a bit deeper and plops down with a splash. “Ugh, this is disgusting. I’m gonna get muck stuck in my ass.”

“But it’s nice and warm, isn’t it?” you say with a pleased sigh.

“So are furs in front of a fire,” he grumbles.

You laugh. “Yeah, but those don’t make you smell any better.”

"You're just trying to make up for the not having bathhouses thing aren't you?"

"Well yeah."

He rolls his eyes. You know he thinks you're ridiculous. But he also thinks you're cute, so whatever.

“So what do you think of Blackreach so far?” You ask, tactfully changing the subject.

He hesitates for a moment, chewing his inner lip. “It’s nice. I just hope no Falmer find us.”

“Can’t you just growl at them and tell them to go away?”

“…I suppose. But I still can’t really wrap my head around what I’m supposed to do with them now. Since apparently there’s this blood oath bullshit.” He runs his hand through his hair, makes a weird face, and then throws himself backward into the water.

“Karkat!?” Shit, what happened? Is he okay? Shit, shit, shit…

And then he resurfaces. “Sorry, that was disgusting. Better now.”

You burst out laughing, and he scowls at you.

“Sorry,” you squeak out between guffaws, “I thought you- thought you were dying or something.”

“And that’s funny now?! Fuck, I wanted you to not flip your shit every time I got a fucking
There’s a witty retort for that somewhere. You’ll find it when you’re not laughing so hard you feel like you’re gonna puke. Karkat reaches over and gives you a hard shove. You fall over with all the grace of a fish being dropped on a dock, creating a massive splash that leaves him sputtering.

“Didn’t think that one over, did you?” You ask when you resurface.

“Just shut up and wash yourself.” He says, scrubbing his arm like he’s trying to tear the skin off.

After he’s done scrubbing a patch of skin it positively gleams in the dim light. A drop of water falls from his hair, rolls down his cheek and neck, over his shoulder... But then he moves, muscles rippling as he changes position a little bit. You can’t take your eyes off of him. Oh, Dibella he’s beautiful. He’s not as slim as he was when you first met, less ethereal and more earthly. His arms are thicker now, trunk more solid. And it shows when he fights, doesn’t it? You haven’t thought about it much, but he’s taken hits without flinching that would have knocked him out a few months ago. The change has been slow, but, shit, how could you not notice until when you compare him now to the first time you washed together, that first time you looked him over to see what you were working with.

But you can’t just stick to that innocent memory, can you? Instead your mind is conjuring up memories of that night in your house, touching and kissing, the air becoming hot and humid in spite of the chill outside. How different would it feel if you took him back to that outbuilding and ran your hands over every inch of him? How would it feel to really pay attention to how he’s changed? You’re not sure, but that sounds really, really nice.

Wow, the water’s feeling warm. He glances over at you, just an innocent little look, and you blush so hard your hair might catch fire. Hopefully between your dark skin and the lack of light he won’t notice. Please, please don’t notice.

Of course, he startles a little bit and then smiles with eyes half-lidded.

Well, if he had to notice, at least he doesn’t seem to mind.

More than that, he’s giving you the impression he wants you too. Oh, you hope that’s true. If it is-

In your mind’s eye you see him arching off the bed beneath you, desperately clutching you or the sheets or anything else, keening like an animal in heat as he comes undone...

Oh please, oh please, oh please...

“Let’s head back,” he says, his voice soft and sensual “If you’re ready, I mean.”

“Yeah.” Thank you, voice, for cracking like a damn kid’s. You clear your throat, trying to get it to behave. “Yeah, I’m good.”

He gets out of the water and you’re gawking again. You follow the water as it slides down his back, over his ass, down his legs. Ooh, you didn’t get a good look any of that when you were sitting down, did you?

As you scramble to your feet, you really hope he doesn’t glance back. You’re half hard just from looking at him and he’d never fucking let you live that down, you know it. Thankfully, he just pauses at the shore to gather up his stuff and heads back towards the building.

(Maybe if you’re lucky he’s aroused too and just as embarrassed about it as you are. But hey,
you’re probably lucky enough that he seems to want this).

He leads you back to the building and dumps most of his shit to the side before carefully hanging his wet clothes on a chair beside the fire. The light dances on his skin and your hands are trembling as you carefully set your robes to the side. Then he turns to look at you, face half illuminated, half hidden by shadow, and entirely flawless.

“I want to kiss you.” You say because there’s nothing else you can think of.

“Then why don’t you?” he asks, voice scarcely above a whisper.

And you do, bracing your arms on the wall behind him. Oh yeah, this is a lot nicer now that you’ve both bathed. This is probably going to make you get all sweaty and gross again, but the river’s right there so you can always take another bath. But then you’d realize how hot he is again and you’d be right back here. Then again, that doesn't sound too bad either.

He throws his arms around your neck, keeping you down against him. Like you would ever leave! Fuck, skin to skin like this he’s so warm. You drop your hands to pull him close and trace his spine. He lets out a little groan and arches up into you. Ooh, if the pressure on your thigh is any indication, you aren’t the only one really into this.

“Bed.” He says, more of a command than a question.

“If I’m gonna move you gotta let go.” No voice wavering at all! Go you!

“Oh. Right.”

He takes a step away and just stands there, arms down at his sides.

“Are you gonna-“ You ask.

“You first?” he says.

“No.”

“Oh, I thought you wanted-“

You place a finger to his lips. Your original intent is just to cut him off, but then tracing his mouth is just so fun… “I do, but not like that. You always take the lead, Karkat. It’s my turn to make you feel good.”

He swallows. “Yeah. We can do that.”

“Lie down for me,” you whisper.

Karkat gasps and scrambles onto the bed. Did you just succeed at sounding cool? Score! You approach him slowly, hoping you look more like you’re stalking your prey than afraid of fucking up. His legs are spread, so you kneel in between them, running your hands up his belly and back down his sides. Oh, Dibella he feels as good as he looks, just a little bit of softness over muscle. He arches up ever so slightly into your touches and you can feel the lean strength of his body. His eyelids flutter and he lets out a beautiful groan.

This is exactly what you wanted. You have him coming apart under you. Every inch of him is yours and you’re gonna take it and he’s gonna love it.

You hope.
“More,” he moans.

*You can't do this,* a voice inside of you says.

*You won't ever be as good as he is.*

*You'll find some way to hurt him.*

*You-

“John? Are you okay?” Karkat asks.

You push the thoughts away. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine. If you want to stop it’s okay, we can-“

“No!” You stroke his hair. “I want this. More than anything. It’s just… I’m a little nervous.”

The smile returns to his face. “Gods, sometimes I’m still shocked we got over ourselves enough to let this happen the first time.”

You snort. “We would have gotten around to it eventually.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah, okay, maybe not.”

He makes a satisfied noise and you cut him off by slamming your lips together. He groans appreciatively and wraps his arms around your neck. You open your mouth and he reciprocates, slipping his tongue past your teeth. To be honest, you don’t fully get the tongue thing. It feels funny and your mouth tastes really weird when you finish. But damn do you enjoy it for some reason.

It probably helps that you’ve instinctively started rutting against him. He throws his legs up around your waist, and clings. His back actually comes up off of the bedroll so he can press fully against you. His skin has gone from warm to burning hot, but you still want to wrap yourself in him completely. You wish you could sink into him and never leave. When you get back to Whiterun you’re buying that special oil. You need to literally get inside of him, make love to him, give him everything you have. But for now you’ll just have to make do.

Eventually, he needs to come away for air and when he does he lets go and flops back down. His eyes are glassy and his lips are red and it is *fantastic.*

“I love you.” He whispers.

*How are you going to do this? You can’t bear to look away from him when he’s like this, and if you’re pressing against him properly your faces don’t line up right.*

“Oh, don’t make me beg…”

Maybe it’s the fact that all of your blood has run south so there’s none of it left in your brain, but that sounded more like an offer than an actual plea. And maybe it’s selfish, but you really do want to see him desperate, you want him to completely lose himself. Fuck it; if that happens you want to be able to watch and appreciate it.

Somehow your sex-consumed brain manages to come up with a solution. Maybe not the best one,
but it just might work.

“Okay,” you say. “I haven’t really tried this before, but—”

“That’s okay. Please, just touch me.”

You smile and begin sliding down his body. He looks at you with confusion as you place your hands on his hips. You kiss your way down his chest and belly, loving how his body feels under your lips. You keep your eyes on him the whole time, watching his expression closely as he gazes up at you with lust. You kiss down his right hip but go no further. His eyes are full of a combination of confusion and desire and it’s absolutely gorgeous. It isn’t until you start to lift your head that his eyes go wide with realization and he places his hand over his mouth.

And then you lower your head again and take his cock into your mouth. Karkat screams unabashedly and tries to arch up into you, but you stop him with a firm hand on his hip. You’ve heard that kind of thing can make you gag and that sounds like the opposite of fun. If nothing else, it would distract you from watching the show, and right now you have a front row seat to the greatest spectacle you’ve ever seen.

Karkat’s chest heaves as he desperately tries to get enough air. His hands fist the bedroll desperately and he lets out a stream of little choked noises. He’s pushing his hips up, wanting to get more, but you’re not sure you can fit any more in your mouth. Instead you move one hand (please don’t let him buck) to pump his base. His back arches off the bed and he lets out a long, drawn-out groan.

Yes this. This is fucking perfect. You never want to look at anything else ever. And this doesn’t even taste too bad, but that might just be the lust talking. Now just don’t fuck it up. Okay, you read this ages ago, but try to remember. Watch your teeth; pull up a little bit if you need to breathe through your nose… Oh Dibella he’s gorgeous. And he’s practically singing for you. Any thoughts about technique are completely gone.

Your hips roll automatically against nothing. Without thinking you move the hand that was on Karkat’s dick to yours. He whines pathetically and you should really help him but fuck you’re not sure you can stop yourself. A moment later he untangles his fingers from the bedroll and grasps desperately at his cock.

Well, that’s one less thing you have to do. You let out a little laugh and Karkat gasps. Oh! Right! If you make noise, that’s supposed to feel good. You start humming some tuneless something, and Karkat practically dies. His body goes completely rigid and he just gasps, desperately gulping air. He shudders once, twice, and then his hands fly to your hair. That actually feels really nice? You kind of want him to pull harder.

But then he thrusts up and he hits the back of your throat and you gag. You pull away and take a few deep breaths, trying to convince yourself not to throw up. Karkat looks down at you sheepishly.

“Sorry, shit. I didn’t mean to…” he murmurs.

“It’s okay,” you say.

“You wanna come up here?” he asks softly.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

You slide back up so that you’re about even again and wrap one hand around both of you.
“Oh fuck,” Karkat whispers, throwing his arms around your shoulders. “Why are you so damn huge?”

“Blame my dad I guess?”

“Hnnn- Thank more like,” he groans into your chest.

With a breathless chuckle you start to pump both of your dicks as you slide ever so slightly against him. Wow this is actually pretty difficult. How does Karkat do it?

Well, if you look as warm and blissful as he does when you’re against the sheets it’s not too surprising he can power through. You pull your upper body away and arch your back so you can lean down to kiss him and gently nibble at his lip. He pushes back, giving as much as he’s receiving.

“I love you” he whispers between kisses.

“Love you too.”

“So much”

“I need you,” you breathe.

“Already yours.”

And that just pings you so damn much. You want more, you need more. You put more of your weight on him, trying to get as much skin on skin contact as possible. He puts his hand down, over yours, adding even more pressure onto your dicks. He’s letting out a constant stream of praises and profanity and you can’t understand half of it, but you’re not sure if that’s because he’s actually speaking Dunmeri or you’re just that far gone.

To be honest, all that matters is the overtone of want. His cries are rising in pitch and he writhes and spasms against you, nails digging into your back. And fuck, you need him. You need more, so much more. You wish you could cling, but both of your hands are busy. And then he presses up against you one more time, squeezing both your hand and your dick and you are done.

Luckily, it seems like he is too. His breaths are still heavy, but slower now. You let go of your slowly softening dicks and wipe your hand on a rag someone had wisely placed on the bedside table. Karkat whines and you bury your face in the crook of his neck. He still has his arms around you, but he’s gone from desperate clutching to gentle stroking. It’s nice. Everything is just nice.

But you’re probably kind of crushing him. So you roll the two of you over onto your sides so you don’t have to stop the snuggle party.

“Feeling better?” you joke.

You were expecting him to laugh, or grumble, or smack you. What you weren’t expecting was for him to sigh heavily and roll away.

“Karkat?” You ask. “Shit, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-“

“I never planned for any of this shit to happen,” he says. “When I was a kid I thought I had it all figured out. A lot of people were trying to get me and Terezi together, so I just assumed that would happen. I figured we’d go south and get married, have a normal life. But then the guards happened. And then Helgen happened. And then we happened. Now I can’t imagine anyone I’d rather be with
than you, or anywhere I’d rather be than here. I don’t want this to end, John.”

“It doesn’t have to,” You say. “I’m not planning on going anywhere.”

“Plans change. And what if they’re right, John? What if this is just some weird splinter world, and when this is all over we’ll wind up as nothing but scattered memories in the brains of a couple teenagers? Even if fate in every universe wants to bring us together, most of them don’t bring us together. And I wasn’t with you in the world the vampires showed us. I think I was maybe with Dave?”

“To be fair, it wasn’t really clear,” you say.

“I feel like it was fucking heavily implied,” He responds drily. “And those versions of us seemed plenty fine and happy, but that doesn’t change that I don’t want to give this up.” He gasps, tears running down his cheeks. “And even if they’re wrong you’re you and I’m me so at some point we’re going to have to-

“Karkat-” You wrap your arms around him. “Karkat, it’s okay. Shhh”

“How the fuck can you say it’s okay? It’s not okay!”

“Karkat, I have no idea if any of that’s true. Maybe you feel some kind of magicy connection to the story they told, but I don’t. And either way, I don’t think it matters. I don’t care what’s going on in another time in another world. We’re right here right now. And here and now I love you okay? This is our world, and we’re gonna make it the best of it. And after all this is over, I’ll take you home with me. Please, Karkat, just stay. I want to be with you forever.”

His eyes go wide and you have to look away. “John…”

“Yeah?”

He sniffs and wipes his nose. “Did you just fucking propose to me while I’m crying because we’re having the most emotionally intense pillow talk ever?”

“Um… I guess?”

With a dry laugh, he lies back. “Oh, when we get out of this hole you’d better do it properly or I might have to say no.”

You smile. “Deal.”
Chapter 19

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

Chapter Notes

We're actually approaching the end here. Depending on how much shit I decide to add in the later chapters, we're 2/3 of the way through by page count. Thank you guys for sticking through with me this far. If you liked it, please do comment. I absolutely love getting them, especially on this piece, it makes my entire day.

Also I might do a second update this week for 4/13. It depends how long it takes me to finish my actual 4/13 piece and if I have time to edit the next chapter before then.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2nd? 3rd? 4th? ugh, 5th sleep after midas 25th sun's dawn 4e202

can’t wait until we get out and i can actually know what day it is.

karkat seems happy (or at least less snarky than usual) at least. we’re working our way around the ruins. but we have absolutely no idea how big this place actually is or where to find the tower of mzark. we've found a bunch of towers, but to be honest they all look the same to me and it’s not like they have little plates on them telling you what tower it is, so we have to go through and explore all of those. it’s just so frustrating because we know where it’s supposed to be from the surface, but it’s not like we can tell where we are relative to anything topside.

but we'll find it. this place can’t go on forever.

…can it?

As soon as you enter this tower you can tell something’s different. There’s an odd feeling in the air, a tingling of ancient magic that makes your hair stand on end. And if even you can feel it it's gotta be something serious. John's in full alert mode, eyes sharp as he visually examines every inch the entry hall. His hand twitches slightly. You're pretty sure he's debating whether or not he should call his hammer.

“We shouldn’t be in here,” you say. “Something’s really fucked up.”

“I donno,” John replies, "I think that actually might be a good sign?" The uncertainty creeps into his voice, turning the statement into a question.

You sigh. “Guess our job is to run head first screaming into danger. As usual.”

Well, that seems to settle John’s nerves a little. Or at least make him pretend it does. He laughs and begins to climb the spiral stairs. You follow.

With each step you take you begin to feel more and more like this might be the right place. The uneasy feeling’s getting stronger and stronger as you ascend. Then you pass through an opening to an upper floor and-
Yep, this is it.

You enter into a large domed room. The upper part of the chamber is full of a strange golden device, hanging like an ominous gilded spider. Up at the top you see a teardrop-shaped vessel made of greenish glass. Whatever’s inside of it is sending out waves of magic that beats against your skin like the sun on a hot day.

If that’s not the elder scroll, you don’t know what is.

Now it’s just a question of how to get up there. Or maybe you’re supposed to get it down here? You see a set of pillars on a platform above you and climb the ramp while John’s still staring at the contraption. He notices a few moments later and bounds up to you.

“Well this is annoying,” you mutter.

“What is?” John asks.

“Button puzzle. But the buttons are locked off.”

“Oh.”

You shove him around and rummage through his backpack. “I think we need that block Rose gave us. Where’d you put it?”

“Wrapped in the rain cloaks.” He bends his knees a bit so you can get all the way to the bottom.

With a triumphant cry, you pull the cube free and slap it into the holder. The small gold cages that had been covering the bright blue buttons slide open.

“Alright. Now we just have to figure this out,” John says “How hard can it be?” He lifts his hand and gets to work on the puzzle.

Click, click, click.

“Nope.”

Click, click.

“Nope.”

Click, click, click, click.

“Nope.”

“Oh fucking Oblivion! Come on, John!”

“It’s harder than it looks!” He complains.

“Oh just scoot over!” You shove him to the side with your hip and look down at the panel.

Click, click, click.

“…Shit.”

“Ha!”

“Shut up!” you growl.
Click, click, click, click-

The machinery spins and the Elder Scroll begins to descend.

Once the glass container reaches the floor, the top lifts off with the normal amount of dwarven clanking. Then an invisible wave of magic breaks against the two of you and knocks you to the ground. You slide a good foot along the smooth cement floor.

You can’t breathe. You want to but you just can’t. Come on, Karkat. You can't die here like this!

But then your lungs realize that they’re supposed to do a thing and they work again. Oh. Nothing special, no weird curse, just the wind knocked out of you by an unseen force.

…Wait, when did that become nothing special? You blame John.

John sits up and starts laughing. “Let’s do that again!”

It shouldn’t be funny. You should probably be mad he’d even suggest it. But when you look over his hair is completely on end and his eyes are blown wide. His glasses sit slightly askew on his face. This is the kind of thing you hear happens to crazy mages but you thought it was all just exaggerated for comical effect. You try not to laugh, but then you have to let out a sputter, then a chortle, then a throw-your-hands-over-your-face-whole-body-shaking-uncontrollably-because-you’re-laughing-so-hard laugh.

The air tastes like old thunderstorms and campfire smoke.

John takes a moment to stand. He’s probably enjoying watching you make an ass out of yourself, the little shit. But eventually you manage to get a hold of yourself. He offers you a hand and helps you to your feet. When you’re up, he turns away from you but doesn’t let go.

His hand shakes in your grip and you squeeze back more tightly.

“You know,” you say, “I hope that thing about it burning your hand if you touch it isn’t true. That would suck.”

“Hopefully Rose would have told us.” He starts walking forward and you immediately fall into step without noticing. Your eyes stay locked on the Elder Scroll.

It’s such a small thing. It looks just like dozens or hundreds of others in libraries across Skyrim. There’s gilded decoration on it, but nothing more extravagant than you’ve seen before. And yet, there’s just a force radiating from it in a gentle ebb and flow. As it breathes you feel caught, uncertain if you want to run towards it or away.

John is the only thing that keeps you steady as the waves or breaths or whatever-the-fuck of raw power intensify. Every inch you move it gets stronger, as does your impulse to run away. The trembling in John's hand has gotten worse, but his steps are sure and even. You know the confidence is fake, but somehow it still makes you feel better. He doesn’t stop until the two of you are a few inches from the scroll. It feels like standing right beside a bonfire in the middle of summer.

You have no idea how you’re going to get this thing back. Thalmor will be on you like flies on a mammoth. John looks at you, sharing your uncertainty. No, you’re going to do this. You have to. John blinks but then nods, determination in his eyes. He reaches forward and his fingers wrap around the scroll.
And then everything is still. The waves of energy stop. John turns the Elder Scroll over in his hands, looking down at it confusedly.

“What happened?” You ask.

“Nothing, actually. I guess… we just have this now?” He pulls his backpack from his shoulders and sets it on the ground.

“Aren’t you supposed to get some kind of vision or power or some bullshit like that?”

“Well, you normally only get a vision if you read it, and I'd rather not risk going blind,” John says as he rummages through his pack. "I think maybe it'll reactivate once we get it to the time wound, but until then I'm not messing with it."

“I hope so. Otherwise this is all really anticlimactic.”

John pulls out the same cloak the cube had been in and wraps the Scroll for safekeeping.

“Well, at least that answers the question of how we’re going to avoid getting jumped and murdered on the way out,” you add dryly.

“They'll have to save that for later,” he replies with a laugh.

“Aren’t you supposed to be the positive one?”

“Yeah, it’s called playing along. Anyway, we have an Elder Scroll! Yay!”

He throws his hand up in the air like a child who just got a new toy. Your dragonborn, ladies and gentlemen. But it does help take your mind off of the fact that you have no idea what the fuck you’re doing.

Now there's just the question of how the hell you get out of here.

---

turdas 5th first seed, 4e202

we know what day it is now! hooray! we finally got out of blackreach today, and it feels so good to breathe fresh air again. we skirted around a giant camp and a few more dwarven ruins. gosh, i almost forgot how cold it was out here!

we didn’t make it as far as i would have liked. we only got to a lake called mara’s eye and it turned out there was a secret cave on an island in the middle! there were a few vampires there, but they were apparently some of rose’s people, so they let us stay the night and told us what day it was.

with any luck, we’ll make it to ivarstead tomorrow, and hopefully get up to the throat of the world on loredas.

---

FREDAS 6TH FIRST SEED 4E202

WE MANAGE TO GET TO IVARSTEAD TODAY. WE TRADED SOME OF OUR SHIT, WHICH SHOULD MAKE CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN A LOT EASIER. WE'RE LEAVING THE HORSE BUT TAKING OUR ARMOR WITH US. WHO KNOWS WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN WHEN WE MESS WITH THE FABRIC OF THE FUCKING UNIVERSE? NOT ME, AND NOT JOHN, SO WE'RE GONNA BE FUCKING PREPARED.
WE ALSO RAN INTO SOME MORE CULTISTS WHO TRIED TO KILL US. APPARENTLY THEY’RE BECOMING MORE AND MORE OF A PROBLEM HERE IN THE EAST. BUT AT LEAST THAT MEANS THERE ARE SOME SMALL BOUNTIES ON THEM. HOPEFULLY SOMEONE ELSE WILL DEAL WITH THAT SINCE WE HAVE MORE IMPORTANT SHIT TO DO, LIKE TRYING TO KEEP THE WORLD FROM ENDING.

…I SHOULD MAKE SURE JOHN DOESN’T GET IT IN HIS HEAD THAT THE CULTIST THING HIS PROBLEM, EVEN THOUGH THEY KEEP TALKING ABOUT HIM BEING A FALSE DRAGONBORN OR WHATEVER. I SWEAR, HE JUST LOVES BEING THE ERRAND BOY.

ALSO IT’S A LITTLE WARMER AROUND HERE, OR MAYBE THAT’S JUST THE TREES BLOCKING MORE OF THE WIND. I WOULD FORMALLY LIKE TO THANK WHATEVER GOD MADE FORESTS BECAUSE THEY’RE GREAT. SERIOUSLY. I HATE NOT FEELING MY EARS.

You move as quickly as you can, but it's still well after dark by the time you reach the mountain's summit. Pyralspite is perched on top of the massive stone monolith. Terezi stands at its base, leaning casually on a long sword and wearing red leather armor. You're glad you decided to haul all of your gear, even if your back's starting to get sore.

“You're not planning to fight like this, are you?” Karkat demands.

“No, I just happen to like dressing up and swinging around ten pounds of metal for show,” she replies, voice dripping with sarcasm.

*Shush.* Pyralspite says. *We must move quickly. Don your armor with speed, mortals. I feel time shudder at the Elder Scroll's presence. This will not escape Alduin's sight for long.*

You and Karkat nod and pull your bags from your shoulders. Maybe it is the whole "time shuddering" thing, but the air feels tense. It’s as highly charged as when you released the Scroll, but now instead of gentle waves all you feel is a heavy pressure. It’s hard to say if it’s that or the altitude which makes it hard to breathe. Your fingers are trembling slightly, but you and Karkat manage to get yourselves into your armor. Terezi stands still and silent. You feel like she's watching you, even though you know she can't. When you think you're ready you look up at Pyralspite. She nods and you take a deep breath. Here it goes.

When you pull the Scroll from your bag, the magic in the air goes from pressure to jaggedly broken. Everyone except for Pyralspite takes in a quick, hissing breath. The dragon just stares down at you with her sightless eyes.

Just to the right of the monolith the air trembles and glows a reddish color.

*There. Take the Elder Scroll to the time wound and read it. It will show you a vision of how to defeat Alduin. The rest of us will prepare.*

“You think we're going to have to fight?” You ask.

*Perhaps he would not have noticed the mere presence of the scroll here, but to meddle with time in such a way will not escape Alduin’s sight. He will come, and we will do our best to stall him. But you, Dovahkiin, must be ready to use the spell of the ancients if we are to be victorious this day.*

“But doesn't the prophesy say we're not supposed to kill him yet?” You ask.
We need not defeat him fully, simply cause a retreat. He will leave if he does not think the odds are in his favor.

You nod, step forward, and open the scroll.

It is impossible to understand the script on the parchment, but before you can process anything it begins to glow, and through the ink you see shattered pieces of another time. You pull the scroll closer to try to see better and the vision spreads until it surrounds you completely. You can look around and see the devastation of battle that surrounds you, but you can’t move. Dragons are flying, falling, being killed, but everything’s happening too quick for you to know how many people they’re taking down with them. The snow around you is soaked red with blood. It almost looks like the sky is too, and it rains fire like it did back in Helgen.

In front of you stand two Nords, both heavily armored and facing off against a large brown dragon. They dispatch it quickly and begin to speak. It’s in old Nordic, so you really should have no idea what’s going on, but somehow you understand, weird connotations Karkat always yells at you for not grasping in Dunmeri included.

“This is a glorious/proud day, is it not?” The woman asks.

“You’re still too confident/foolish,” The man replies.

“Why should I not be? We have Dragonrend. The dragon/lord/lesser god will die this day.”

“Still, it is best to be prepared.” An old man says from behind you. You turn and see he holds the Elder Scroll in his hands.

“You have it!” The younger man says triumphantly.

The woman scoffs. “Well, there you are, brother. Your pathetic/domestic ‘backup plan’ has been prepared.”

“We shall see what is needed,” the older man says, stroking his beard.

“And soon,” the woman readies her sword. “Here he comes!”

Bright flashes of color fill the sky, and you see massive green coils dipping under from the clouds.

“All together now!” The old man says. They look skywards and as one shout towards the dragon.

And thank every single god for those weird magical shenanigans because you understand. As Lord English’s massive form falls to the ground, you feel confident you can actually win this thing.

But then the dragon takes a deep breath and spits fire onto the woman. When it recedes her blackened skeleton remains standing for a moment. Lord English gives out a harsh laugh and the body collapses into dust.

“Whatever bullshit this is,” he says. “It will not be enough to stop me.”

“Gormlaith!” Shouts the younger man. He whips around to his remaining companion. “Ready the Elder Scroll!”

“Really?” English asks dryly. “You cannot hope to defeat me, pathetic/mortal/tiny creatures, even with such an artifact.”
The old man starts to sing, his voice smooth and low. The younger one joins him in a harmony that settles weird and hot in your bones.

“Come now, a time spell? I thought you fools/children would know better than that. I am the Lord of all time.”

They raise their voices and and wind begins to wind up around English’s body. For a moment, the dragon looks shaken. He tries to lift his wings but seems to still be held down. He glares at the warriors. Red lightning comes up from the ground beside him.

“You think-“ he grunts. “You may think you have won, but I shall return for you. I shall devour your very souls when you face me in Sovngarde!”

With that, the light grows blinding. You shut your eyes tightly, and when you open them again the sky is clear, the snow is white. You think you're back in the present, but you still hear the roar of dragons and the clash of steel on scales.

“John! Get your head out of your ass and help us!” Karkat yells.

You turn and see him, Terezi, and Pyralspite locked in combat with Lord English. You take a deep breath and shout

“Joor Zah Frul!”

And then Lord English falls, his massive black wings pinned to his sides. He turns his head towards you.

“So you have learned their words. Big deal. They could not defeat me, and neither will you!”

He prepares to spit fire at you, but you manage to throw up a massive wall of wind that redirects the deadly flames upwards.

Pyralspite takes advantage of the situation and digs her teeth into Lord English’s neck. He lets out a pained roar and Karkat and Terezi leap to him, Terezi hacking between his scales while Karkat digs his sickles into the soft tissue of his wings.

“Prophesy, smophesy!” Karkat shouts. “Let's finish this now!”

You call forth your hammer and charge forward, but at that moment Lord English seems to regain some of his power. His body shudders and then he disappears from under them, causing the other three to fall. You look up and there he is, flying once more and preparing to attack.

“Keep him down, John!” Terezi yells.

You let out another shout and he falls back down a few moments later. You keep your distance and shoot spells this time, trying to keep an eye out for signs of your shout wearing off. But this time he’s not shaken. He strikes out and sinks his fangs into Pyralspite’s wing, tearing a huge chunk of the membrane. Steaming red blood spills onto the snow as the white dragon lets out a horrific screech.

“Pyral!” Terezi shouts.

“Taking your sight was not good enough, huh? Now let us see how you do without the sky you stupid bitch!”
Terezi leaps in between them, shoving her sword up through the roof of Lord English’s mouth. He lifts his wings to take off and you shout again. His wings clamp close to his sides and for a moment you see actual fear in the monster’s eyes. That is, until Karkat jumps on his head and shoves his sickles into them.

But the dragon's not done yet. There’s sparks of light and color in his throat. He’s going to kill Terezi. You can’t get there in time. You call on the wind, trying to force the fire back, but Pyralspite is faster. She grabs Terezi in her mouth and throws her out of the way, taking the blunt of Lord English’s attack. Unlike the Nord in the vision, Pyral isn't instantly vaporized, but she is knocked back against the stone monument. She doesn’t move.

While you’re busy staring at Pyralspite’s crumpled form, English lets out a mighty shake, sending Karkat flying. A large red gear appears in the sky, and light rains down upon Lord English, instantly healing his wounds. He hoists his head upwards and then flies into the air. You try to shout him back down, but it has no effect.

“Do you not get it, you pathetic mortals? So long as I have time at my command, you will never defeat me! I do not doubt that you will try. I have seen it. But the next and more important victory will be mine, when I come to claim you in Sovngarde!”

He lets out a long maniacal laugh and disappears into the clouds.

As soon as he vanishes, you collapse onto your knees. Karkat leaps over and crouches beside you.

“John, are you-“

“I’m fine. Just tired. Magic, you know?” He frowns at you, unconvinced but knowing full well that he won’t get anywhere by arguing.

Terezi shakily gets to her feet and limps over towards Pyralspite. There are tears in her eyes. “No… Pyral, you can’t be-“

The dragon lets out a shuddering breath. Terezi gasps and embraces the creature. “Oh thank the divines, the daedra, I don’t even fucking care. Please, you have to stay with us!”

“Oh… my child…” Pyral says out loud, clear strain in her voice.

“Help me over.” You say to Karkat.

“What?”

“I’m gonna try to save her.”

“Not on your own, you’re not! You’ll kill yourself too.”

“But I have to do something! Please, help me up!”

He growls. “Fine. But take this” He thrusts a small blue bottle into your hands. “This should help you not die.”

You take a sip of the potion and feel heat and energy racing through you. It’s almost enough to let you get up on your own, but not quite. Thankfully, he helps you to your feet and gets you over to Pyralspite. You prepare a healing spell and touch the dragon’s side. Her broken body practically yanks the energy from you, taking it so quickly that it makes your head spin. You can stand it for a few seconds, but then you have to pull away, wait for your magic to stabilize.
Karkat pulls a few more vials from his cloak, leaves them at your side, and runs off to Terezi’s hut. You take another swig of potion and try again. Terezi stops crying and she seems to be listening intently, her ear pressed against the dragon's chest.

“This- this is actually helping her. Keep it up.”

“What do you think I’m doing?!” You snap.

She recoils.

“Sorry,” You say, turning back to the dragon. You have to focus. Restoration is hard, especially since you’re trying to do it on something not humanoid. But you’re exhausted. Even with the extra magica potions, it feels like you’re not doing anything. She just needs so much, way more than your body could ever hold. You feel small.

It’s silent except for the wind and Pyralspite’s strained breathing. Then Karkat returns, dragging a large pot along with him.

“What’s that?” You ask.

“Everything we have. Mostly blue mountain flowers, garlic, and moss, but there’s plenty of other stuff in here too.” He soaks a rag in the potion and begins rubbing it on Pyralspite’s torn wing. The bleeding stops as the skin begins to heal over.

“Terezi, can you lift her head?”

“Um, a bit maybe.”

“John, take a damn second and help her.”

You scoot over and between the two of you, you get the dragon’s head tilted upward. Karkat begins to ladle the mixture into Pyral’s mouth. The change is slow but unquestionable. The weight in your hands begins to lessen and her breathing becomes more even. Soon, one of her eyes flutters open. Terezi strokes her snout.

“It’s okay. We’ve got you.”

Far too soon, Karkat runs out of potion. He sets the pot down and throws the ladle back into it.

“What now?” You ask.

“I think we just have to wait.” Terezi says softly. “I mean, you used everything you have, Karkat used everything he had. Now we just… need to go inside and hope for the best.”

"I could-" you start to say.

"No," they both say at the same time.

"Doing your best doesn't mean killing yourself, and, even if it normally did, we need you alive.” Terezi scolds you. She runs her hand across Pyral’s scales. “She’s warmer now, and it’s like she’s just asleep. Let's go inside. She wouldn’t want us to freeze to death on her account.”

“Yeah…” Karkat says softly.

Terezi stands, turns her back on the dragon, and marches back to her house. Karkat helps you to your feet and the two of you limp along after her.
This weather is fucking stupid. Ain’t it supposed to be getting on to spring? And yet this is one of the worst blizzards you’ve trudged through in centuries. Not like you’re gonna complain about it, though. Especially since no one’s here but Dirk and he’d give you shit for the rest of eternity. Damn, though, it’s hard to navigate when you can barely see twenty feet in front of you. It doesn’t help that this shit has been weathered something awful. The last time you were here all of these pillars were still whole and intricately carved. Now most of them just look like unusually phallic boulders.

Then you feel it. Sudden, sharp. Time ripples and creaks. Everything feels jerky even though it looks smooth. Your head spins and for a torn, bent moment you think you’re going to fall over. Fuck, this can’t be good. You try to soothe time but your magic doesn’t respond. Something bigger than you is locking you out. Fuck.


You shake your head, trying to dislodge the feeling. “I’ll be fine. I think John and Karkat are picking at the Time Wound.”

“Should we be worried about that?”

“Nah. It didn’t like it, but…” You take a deep breath. “I don’t think reopening that wound is going to fuck all of spacetime. It’ll heal.”

Like it was actually listening to you, things settle. It feels like you're back at one second per second, but just to be sure... You pull the fat pendant from beneath your shirt, undo the latch so you can see the tiny gears spin. The little thing might be perpetually a hair off, but it's close enough that you can confirm the the time that is is back to being the time that should be.

"What's that?" Dirk asks.

You quickly snap it shut and tuck the pendant back under your shirt. "None of your business."

"What? It from your girlfriend or something?"

That doesn't deserve an answer.

"Dave," he says, pulling out his lecture voice. "You know what happens when you start getting attached."

You start climbing again. "Let's just go already. Night only lasts so long."

Night only lasts another seven hours, thirty four minutes, fifty four seconds, and some number of milliseconds that flies by too fast for you to consciously think of them. There's no way he can know that exactly, but he totally knows you're in no danger. Thankfully, he doesn't press it.

There’s a troll up ahead. Dirk’s on it before you, flash stepping behind it and bisecting it on the way.

Showoff.

You have no idea why he’s wasting his energy trying to impress you. You know him too well for that to work. Still, you oblige him and catch up. After all, you’re the only one who can open this place up.
The snow is getting heavier. Behind you, your footprints disappear almost as quickly as you can make them. Not that much further, though. The massive stone doors are only two more flights of stairs above you.

Dirk is moving more slowly now. You’re sure if you asked he’d say something about the weather or being careful about stairs, but you know better. He’s nervous, maybe even afraid. But you and your brother were never good at talking about feelings, and, besides, you owe him some fake nonchalance from earlier.

As you approach the doors, you reach for your belt and pull a small pouch free.

“Didn’t drop any on the way, did you?” Dirk asks.

“Why? Trying to get out of this?”

“Nah, just making sure we weren’t here for nothing.”

You pull the four pieces of stone from your bag and reassemble them into something like a ring before cramming them in the slot. It takes a little bit of force, but once they’re in place the lock recognizes its key. When you pull on the door it swings smoothly open, still perfectly balanced after all these years.

Inside, at least, things are vaguely like you remember them.

“Well,” Rose said, glancing down at the skeletons reaching towards the exit. “That is clearly anything but ominous.”

“Perhaps we should turn back,” Eralle suggested. “I don’t like the feel of this place.”

“All it really means is that our prize is well-protected, right?” Hefund said. She tucked a strand of her long red hair behind her ear.

“Come on, guys, we got this.” You had to take her side, of course you did. God you were such an idiot, always a sucker for a pretty face. Maybe things haven’t changed that much. "Whatever’s in here, there’s no fucking way it can stand up to us."

"Thanks, Dave," Hefund said, smiling warmly at you.

“Wonder how many of the traps reset themselves,” Dirk murmurs as you continue forward.

You shrug. “With this old-ass magic who knows? But thanks to you a lot of the later draugr can’t have.”

“Let’s hope so. In the meantime, wanna take bets on the skeletal dragon?”

“Come on, dude,” you say, rolling your eyes. “We know for a fact dragons come back to life all the fucking time. It’s gonna be there.”

He shrugs. “Just making conversation.”

It’s not long until you reach that first cavern room. And this time you’re free to go the fast way. You throw the switch, go through the gate, and between you and Dirk you wipe out the dozen or so normal skeletons before the dragon manages to claw its way out of the dirt. So it gets one sword in each eye socket and crumbles to the ground.

Hey, maybe this won’t be as bad as you thought. Depending on how this goes, you might even
suggest it to Rose as a base. It would stop her from complaining about how crowded Castle Volkihar is getting these days, and if she had a central safe haven more vampires might be willing to give up being feral. Worked for you in High Rock, after all. And the murals are kind of her taste, too.

Hefund rushed forward to read the stone carvings, and Dirk followed quickly after. You hung back, watching for any more monsters to spring out at you. Rose stood next to you and tried to make eye contact, but you averted your eyes by pretending to check behind you.

“Dave,” she said, “What are you thinking?”

Honestly, right then you were thinking that you really didn’t want to look at her. It had been a few weeks, but you couldn’t get over her eyes. You think they were blue before? To be honest, it’s hard to remember. It’s been too long now. But just before this adventure she’d turned, and now her skin was even paler and her eyes glowed purple. She placed an icy hand on your arm and you jumped.

“Come on, talk to me.”

“Sorry. I just- I know what I said before, but are you sure this is a good idea, Rose?”

“Labyrinthian was the magical center of Skyrim in the time of the dragons. Imagine all the things we could learn! Imagine the power of the artifacts held here!”

“That’s the problem. I am.”

Just like back then, Dirk is hustling ahead. The frost spirit appears just in time to find itself beheaded by an akaviri blade. You catch up while he’s melting the ice lock on the door.

“Hey, can’t you just chill for a second?”

He stops and pulls his hood back to give you an unimpressed stare.

“Yeah, okay, that was an awful pun, but I’m serious.”

“Nothing back here was a problem back then. It’s definitely not going to be now.”

A harsh wind comes from the tunnel, and you feel your energy being drained from you. A deep voice asks “Who comes to my dark kingdom?”

“Yep, silly me, nothing to worry about,” you whisper.

Dirk gives you a look, but continues a bit more cautiously from there on.

“Cowardly men will find no mercy here.” The voice says

“He’s egging us on,” Dirk says, “Don’t rise to the bait.”

You scoff, as you shove your sword through a draugr “Yeah, because out of the two of us I’m the one with the ego.”

“Is it you children again? Attempting to finish what you failed to all those years ago?”

Now this… this part of the dungeon is different than you remember. It had always been kind of scruffy, but the stone floor has completely given way. The shallow stream of water is still there, but sometime in the last four thousand years it cut its way through the cobblestones and into the earth beneath. The door that should have led to the next room has crumbled and filled with broken
pieces of rock. You really hope there’s still a way forward…

Dirk follows the stream and then beckons you over. There’s a hole in the wall just big enough for you to squeeze through, and it looks like it lets out into some torture chamber. The only issue is it’s about a ten foot drop on the other side.

He throws his pack through and then wiggles in feet-first. You try not to laugh at him.

You fail, but keep it to a muffled sporfle. He gives you a glare and throws a handful of the water at your face. Then he gets in past his shoulders and gravity takes him the rest of the way down. It sounded like a fairly smooth landing, just the plop of Dirk’s boots hitting the floor, but you check anyway. Yep, looks good. So you follow him, and are much much better at ignoring his fucking giggling.

Whatever. He’s totally just jealous because your ass is about fifty times better. He looks like he jammed books down his pants with how flat he is. You land and take a look around. Oh, it's this torture chamber. That saves you some time.

“Shor’s bones…” Hefund said, hand covering her mouth.

Rose inhaled deeply, eyelids fluttering. “Yes, it is… erm…”

“Unpleasant, sis?” Roxy suggested.

“Right, of course.”

Why did you have the feeling she wanted to lick the fucking blood off the cobblestones?

“Take a look,” Roxy continued, kneeling down and wiping at the blood with her fingers. “This is fresh.”

“What?” Dirk asked. He knelt next to her. “Damn, you're right.”

“How is that even possible?” Hefund asked. “No mortal should have set foot in here in…”

“Perhaps they have some way to generate it?” Rose suggested. “That would be… Interesting.”

“Or there’s some other way in and we’re not alone,” You said.

“Troll!” Eralle shouted.

Sure as fuck, it was there right in the next room. Well, time to earn your keep, you thought. Somehow you managed to get there before Dirk, and even with your shitty sword you got a fatal blow, up through the gut. But you heard a snap because your blade broke a foot inside the creature.

Fucking great.

At least you did something. It collapsed against the iron gate, let out a few strained breaths, and then died.

The troll’s gone now. Its skull sits in the corner, but there’s no sign of the rest of it. The smaller bits probably got torn apart by rats centuries ago. The blade of your old sword is mixed in with what’s left of the gate, but both have rusted beyond recognition.

“Hmm… it seems there are fewer of you than I remember. Now why would that be?” The voice
lets out a low chuckle.

Oh, you are gonna murder him so hard.

The pillar room through the opening is in horrible shape. There’s no water or airflow here, and yet the rich carvings have been rubbed away completely. Perhaps it has something to do with the weird bluish white orbs floating aimlessly around the room.

“Oh,” Dirk says. “Didn’t think they’d still be stuck here.”

“You know what they are?” You ask.

“Yeah. They're souls.”

_The room was swarming with draugr. There were six of you armed with magic and weapons, but it was impossible not to be taking damage. It wasn’t long until the mages were exhausted, and all you had was your backup dagger and an awful hilt._

You figured then that that would be it. You were going to die for Rose’s stupid obsession. Somehow, you had kinda figured you’d go out that way.

_Then Dirk grabbed you by the back of your armor and tugged you to the ground. He threw out his arms and there was a flash of pink light. The draugr staggered back as though they’ve all been struck and one by one collapse, screaming in inhuman agony._


_The torchlight brought out the yellow in his skin and highlighted the narrowness of his gold eyes. In that moment, he looked just like your father. You couldn’t breathe._

“Rose isn’t the only one in the family too interested in horrific arcane magic for their own good,” he said, pink sparks still arcing between his fingers. “I’m just glad it worked.”

"Dirk," Roxy said with a laugh. "Your elf is showing." She broke the tension then, just like she always does.

"Shit, sorry." He offered you a hand, giving just a hint of a smile. "Let's keep going."

He waves his hand and the orbs vanish with a flash. “At least this is letting me put them out of their misery.”

“Will there be more?” You ask.

“Well… I’d practiced with bugs and even a rat or two, but a human soul, even one as far degraded as that of a draugr… If these guys are anything to go off of, the separation wasn’t complete. I didn’t try to destroy them or even take them out of this plane of existence, but after a few thousand years…”

“So what you’re really saying is you don’t know,” you say.

"Yep. Got no fucking idea. So be prepared for anything, okay?"

“Still arrogant, aren’t you?” The voice asks. “Even if you have gained understanding, your power will again be your undoing. Your magic will only strengthen me.”

“Keep telling yourself that, buddy,” you growl.
You step boldly forward, and are greeted by a translucent glowing draugr. Reflexively, you draw your sword and run in through.

It crumples to the ground. “Dirk, man, what the hell.”

“You… I was kind of afraid of that.” he says.

“Afraid of what?”

He runs his fingers through his hair. “Since the tie between soul and body wasn’t completely cut, they eventually found their way back, but not before their bodies had disintegrated. If I had to guess, it seems like these guys remembered what their forms were supposed to look like so they kind of tried to fill that space.”

“Okay, and that means what for fighting them?”

“Hell if I know.”

You hear the barking of hounds and shambling footsteps ahead. “Well, I think we’re about to find out.”

Dirk draws his blade and proceeds stealthily, moving silently in his light armor. You follow a bit later in case they’re perceptive enough to catch you.

“Come,” the voice says after a time. “Face your end.”

“This is fireball room, isn’t it?” You ask.

Dirk peers around the corner. “Looks like it. Alright, you’re up.”

You take a few steps forward and freeze time as the traps are about to go off. Aw man, this is so much easier than surrounding yourselves in wards. That was annoying and obnoxious, but now you can prance around and just pluck the soul gems out before they can do a damn thing. When you have the last gem in your hand you let go of the spell.

“You didn’t draw anything on my face, did you?” Dirk asked.

“Well shit, wish I would have thought of that before. Gimmie one second.” You lift your arm again.

“Don’t bullshit me. We both know you didn’t do anything.”

“Yeah, okay. You’re too stoic for it to be funny anyway.”

Dirk lifts his lips twitch faintly upwards. He strides forward into the next room before you get the chance to call him on it.

“Oh wow, look at this!” Eralle exclaimed, pointing up at the mural.

“Looks like by the end this belonged to a dragonpriest,” Rose said. “Here! It seems like they’re bringing their dead to him. So he must have maintained his religious authority as well. Or perhaps those are other priests embalming and blessing the bodies as he watches?”

“You think the dragonpriest is the one who keeps talking to us?” You asked.

“I believe so. Projecting your voice as far as he has been takes a lot of power, and the draining
There are no bats when you enter the throne room this time. The draugr are still there, but they’ve also gone all glowey. It just makes them easier to spot. Dirk sneaks up on a deathlord sitting on a throne and manages to behead him before anyone notices. You even manage to sneak up on a few of them, heavier armor be damned.

The draining wind continues at the end of the room, but Morokei doesn’t taunt you this time. You just shudder as you feel your strength sapped. And then... there you are. This room has changed too, moss and fungi growing on the walls. Somehow that doesn’t make the staging any less dramatic. You enter through a low point, platforms towering above you on both sides. And up on those ledges there they are, just where you left them. Morokei is contained in a ball of light made by the two spirits on the other side of the room. Made by Eralle and Hefund. They don’t acknowledge you as you enter, although Morokei does. He turns his whole head and you can almost see the smirk behind his mask.

“So you have made it. Good. Now free me.”

“Not gonna happen,” you say.

“Oh please. Child, I have killed you once already.”

“That was a long time ago.”

Behind Morokei a familiar figure appears, blurred by the sphere. You ready a spell “Dirk, get ready to break the barrier on three. One, two-“

Dirk releases Eralle and Hefund and sprint to the other side of the room before travelling back in time to stab the lich in the back the moment past you said two. Well, that certainly got to him. His mask flies off, and he glares over his shoulder at you. Well damn, even a major hit from Caledfwlch didn’t do him in? No wonder you failed before.

But it seems that this time the surprise gave you enough of an edge. Dirk flashsteps over and beheads him. The body turns to ash, leaving only the mask and staff behind.

“That was too easy,” you say, picking up the staff of magnus.

“Dave…” Dirk says, a “don’t you do that” heavily implied.

“They shouldn’t have had to die,” you finish anyway.

Dirk groans. You’ve been over this. You know you’ve been over this. You don’t care.

“Look,” he says, “We can’t compare ourselves now to what we were back then. Do you honestly think I don’t wish I had practiced more? That as soon as we came in here I could have pulled his soul from his corpse and crushed it? But I didn’t. So I couldn’t. That’s the way it had to be because-”

“-Because even with time travel you can’t change the past! I know! But it still sucks.”

“I know you know!” He sighs. “You know better than anyone else, Dave. So stop beating yourself
up about it.”

You look away. Dirk walks towards you. You’re expecting a brotherly shoulder-touch, but to your surprise he throws his arms around you and hugs you tightly.

“We can’t win this!” Roxy shouted. She gripped her arm, blood gushing from a deep cut.

Eralle rushed forward to continue the duel against the lich.

“We can’t let him escape either!” You growled.

“Oh Gods, this is all my fault…” Rose said. “I shouldn’t have-“

“There’s no time for that!” Hefund cried, sending more blasts of energy at Morokei. They were visibly weaker than before. “Don’t feel sorry for yourself. We need to think!”

“No,” Dirk said. “We need to stall him. Keep him in a permanent stasis.”

“And I’m guessing you have an idea for how we’re gonna do that.” Roxy said, crossing her arms.

“Yeah. But you’re not gonna like it. There’s this technique called a soul barrier…”

“Soul barrier?” You asked, lowering your ward. “Is that what I think it-“

“Dave, watch out!” Eralle’s shout was drowned out by the harsh crack of lightning. You were lifted off your feet and knocked backwards. Before you even hit the ground, you felt your heart stop and everything went black.

The next thing you knew, you were being shaken awake. You opened your eyes to see a stone ceiling and your siblings hovering over you. Shit, were you back at the college?

Then you realized that there was something wrong. Roxy was crying, Dirk looked deeply troubled, and Rose was warm. It was the last one that was the giveaway, really. You ran your tongue along your teeth, feeling dramatically elongated canines. You closed your eyes and pushed yourself up into a sitting position.

“I’m dead, aren’t I?” You asked.

“Well, strictly speaking you’re undead,” Rose said. “I’m sorry, Dave, it was the only way to save you.”

“Could be worse, I guess.” You experimentally opened and closed your fists. Everything still felt just about the same. But you were hungry. So, so hungry. You didn’t want to think about how you’d fix that particular problem. “The other two?”

“They volunteered,” Dirk said. “All but demanded they would form the barrier, really.”

“Fuck,” you ran your hand through your hair.

For once, Rose was smart enough to say nothing. She just took your free hand and held it tightly.

You told yourself if you could have what was left of the clan, maybe being dead wouldn’t be so bad.

You tried to ignore the feeling that that was a lie.
Dave's necklace is a Nuremberg egg, a small clock that started to be produced in the fifteen hundreds: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuremberg_eggs

Of course, Nuremberg does not exist on Nirn, so they were instead invented in Shornhelm (a city in high rock) and are named accordingly. And Dirk is right, he did get it from his girlfriend, whose identity you are free to speculate upon. It will get confirmed later.
Chapter 20

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

Chapter Summary

Happy 4/13!

I've updated the first chapter as well, so the opening is now in second person present, still karkat's POV. Because I love beating dead horses.

The next morning is clear, and the rising sun makes you up way too early. It’s an awful way of reminding you that, even though there’s still snow on the ground, you’re getting close to spring. Which also means you’re running out of time. Terezi is somehow up before you, stoking the fire to heat up porridge for everyone. Eventually you shake John awake and drag him to the table.

He sits and looks blearily down at his bowl. Occasionally he remembers that he’s supposed to use a spoon to get the food to his mouth before going back to the vacant staring. Thankfully, you and Terezi are both a lot more lucid.

“So where do you think we should go from here?” You ask.

“No idea,” she replies.

“Aren’t you like psychic or something? I mean, you always seemed to know what to do before.”

She shrugs and smiles sadly. “I get people. I know what they’re going to do before they do it, and everything in Windhelm was so focused on people that I was in control. But Alduin… He’s something else. I mean, I know you said you’ve got to gather everyone up, and I’m pretty sure you’ll be able to do that. But then you have to track him down. Maybe there’ll be rumors down below. Like a place where people keep going missing? It would have to be a big spot to hide an army of dragons, but maybe in some of the mountain ranges there’s enough-“

“Actually,” John says, looking up at Terezi. “I think he’s in Sovngarde.”

“What? But that makes no sense,” Terezi says. “I’m not even sure that’s a real place! And how would he even get there if he’s not a Nord and also not dead?”

“But think about it. He mentioned it in the vision I had, and when he said it at the end of the fight he sounded super sure that we’d wind up there, and I don’t think he means after we die. I mean, I’m going to the Shivering Isles. Karkat’s half Nord, but he’s really more Dunmer culturally plus he’s been championed by a few different Daedric Princes, so one of them will probably claim him like Hircine does with werepeople.”

“So he’s holed up in a place he calls Sovengarde, but that doesn’t mean it’s the Sovngarde,” Terezi points out. “And even if it was, we still have no idea how to find him.”

Perhaps I can be of assistance, Pyralspite says, sticking her head through the door.

“You’re awake!” Terezi leaps up out of her chair and throws her arms around the dragon’s neck.
Yes. I am still injured, but at least alive.

“But do you have any idea where Lord English is?” you ask.

*I personally do not, but perhaps I can help you find someone who can.*

“Huh?”

You know of Dragonsreach, do you not?

“You mean the Jarl’s castle in Whiterun?” John asks.

Yes. But do you know how it received that name?

“Hang on a second,” You say. “Is this about that story where the Jarl a million years ago supposedly captured a dragon?”

*Indeed. But this is not some supposed story. The one-eyed Jarl did indeed capture a dragon named Numinex. I went and visited him when he was held in captivity, unable to much of anything but observe as he slowly went mad. Quite sad, really, to see one of our kind brought so low. But Numinex is not important now. If we can use the same trap the Jarl once did, perhaps we can capture one of Alduin’s faithful and use them to gather information.*

“Okay, but how do we get them in there?” John asks.

*That I know not. Numinex would not reveal how he was trapped. Perhaps go speak with the Jarl about it.* She pulls her head back outside.

“Okay, got it!” John says. “Go to Whiterun, talk to the Jarl and-“

A massive crow enters through the still-open door. It nearly crash-lands on the table, knocking over dishes. Its feathers are ruffled and it breathes heavily. It lets out an exasperated caw and fluffs itself up. Then it lifts a wing to begin to preen.

“Well, that’s not ominous,” you say.

“I mean, I wouldn’t go that far-“ John starts.

"Yeah, big black birds are generally not a good sign," you point out.

“But it is weird. Hey, Terezi, do you normally get crows up here?"

“I do not,” she says, poking the bird with a spoon.

The bird caws angrily and smacks Terezi’s hand with its wing.

"Hang on a second," John holds out his hand. "Come here, lil guy."

The crow turns one bright red eye towards him and then hops up on his wrist.

"John?"

"He brought us something," John reaches under the bird with his other hand and, oh yeah, there’s a little leather sleeve tied to its leg. John opens it and pulls out a piece of paper. “That’s usually a pigeon thing but…”
The bird hops back onto the table and starts pecking at some bread. John ignores him and unrolls the letter. You peek over his shoulder.

"dear john or karkat whichever gets this first

"if youre reading this barbie found you so just do me a favor and make sure you tell him hes a good boy he hates these kinds of missions

"me and dirk went through laberynthian and got the staff but it didnt do us much good all we were able to figure out is that scratch is off in solthseim

"rose thinks its important we catch him but that its more important you make sure everyones ready to go on the thirteenth also she says when you get this note therell be a courier waiting for you in town

"anyway dont worry about barbie hell rest up and steal some food and then find his way back when hes ready

"good luck

"dave"

"Firsts the cultists, now Scratch," John says. "I think someone really wants us to go to Solthstheim."

"Did you even read the thing?" you grumble, “Dave said he was taking care of it."

"I know, I know. But it just feels like-"

"We'll burn that bridge when we get to it." You turn to Terezi. "I think we should get moving. It was nice to see you again, though."

“Wish I could say likewise, but yanno.” She smiles softly.

“You sure you don’t wanna come with us?” John asks. “I mean, we’re going to need you for the big climactic battle anyway.”

“Nah. I get the feeling you’re going to have some more shit to do before then. Wouldn’t want to slow you down. Besides, someone has to keep an eye on Pyral, make sure she heals up right.”

You bite your lip. “If you’re sure.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry! I’ll smell you again soon enough.”

You give her hand an affectionate squeeze, and she lunges across the table to hug you. “Stay safe out there, okay? I don’t wanna find out we’re all screwed because you were an idiot and got your brains splattered all over the wall by draugr.”

“Will we be going into more draugr caves?” you ask. “I’m kind of over that.”

She lets go with a laugh and then presses a finger to her lips.

“We’ll find out when we get there,” John says. “Now come on. We apparently have some letters to read!”

When you make it down to Ivarstead the courier is waiting for you. He looks exhausted, deep bags
under his eyes, posture slightly bent. When he sees you, he stands up straight. Wordlessly, he walks towards the two of you and shoves a pile of letters into your hands.

John opens his mouth, presumably to thank him, but he bolts off into the night.

“…Okay.” You say.

“I hope he’s alright…” John says.

“He’ll probably be fine. Couriers are weird.”

John shrugs and the two of you make your way to the inn to read your letters.

dear karkitty,

equius and i were pawsitively ecstatic when we heard you wanted to get everyone together in whiterun! well, okay, i was a bit more excited than he was, but i’m sure he’ll be furry happy to see everyone too! :33

we still have a few beds open in jorrvaskr in case people don’t want to stay at the inns. tell them they can drop in whenever beclaws we love having guests! i’ll purrsonally vouch for them too. they might get challenged to a few fights, but i’m sure any of our furiends could handle it!

i hope to see you soon! stay safe out there, and make sure to write meow if you hear anyone needs anything spurrific.

okay that one was a stretch :<<

oh well

nepeta :33

hi john!!!

your timing was actually really good! :) i had a feeling i was about done here, so i was just packing up to head home when i got your letter. i promised your dad id drop off some things and say hi, but i can make a quick turnaround and head up to skyrim.

it’ll be so great to see you again! i’ve missed hanging out with you. and it should be especially fun since jake and jane will probably be coming back too. it’ll be a whole family reunion!! :DDD

talk to you soon,

jade :)

kARKAT,

i uh, don’t like the sound of this, i’m not sure how much help i’ll be,, but if you and the others all think it’s a good idea i guess i can come,

see you then,

tAVROS
Dear John,

Always getting into trouble aren’t we? Hehe, I’d be glad to come and help.

I’ve moved further south since our last correspondence, actually working in Elsweyr to try to sort out a diplomatic issue involving the existence of two Manes at once. It’ll be nice to do something physical for a change! I’ve missed having a good battle. I’ll have to get moving quickly, but I should reach Skyrim in time. As long as I don’t run into the same kind of trouble you did crossing the border, heh!

Stay safe until then,

Jane

---

hey karkat!

dont worry im way ahead of you! dave showed up and said hes going to teach me all about time magic

im training with him in the reach right now!! im going to swing up and grab tavros before i head down because i think i should be able to convince him to come with us

gosh how long has it been since ive hung out with him?

this end of the world thing is going to be so much fun!

aradia

---

Dear John,

Hello, dear cousin. I hope your adventure in Skyrim is still going well. Or as well as it really could given the situation. It certainly seems like you’re in a bit of a pickle, what with the whole end of the world business. Quite nasty, that. I still have quite a bit of Ayleid exploration to do, but it shouldn’t be a problem to nip up to help in the great battle with Alduin or Lord English or whatever you’ve taken to calling him after the story that the vampires have told you. I noticed you switched off several times in your letter.

Also i finally managed to take the time to complete that translation for you. A few characters were not particularly clear and some others could mean several things but i took my best guess.

“And yet the heir with his dragon blood and daedra-anointed knight will not be enough.

When in Skyrim the twenty for the first time unite

Only then will the lord of time die and his wrongs be undone.

The shattered pieces of the universe reform and the heroes find freedom in victory.’’

To be honest, it seems as though you kind of already that. Or at least it confirms what the archmage said. Anyway see you in rains hand!

Jake
KaRbRo,

DoN’t WoRrY, I’lL bE tHeRe

ImA pRoLiY cRaSh At YoUr PlAcE aNd TrY nOt To EaT aLl YoUr MoThErFuCkIn FoOd :o)

…Or At LeAsT bUy MoRe.

GaMzEe

_________________________

MY SON,

YOUR FOE CERTAINLY SOUNDS POWERFUL AND DANGEROUS, BUT I DOUBT HE IS AS INVULNERABLE AS HE WANTS YOU TO BELIEVE. ALL THINGS WILL ONE DAY FALL, AND IF ANYONE CAN DEFEAT THE SUPPOSED CHILD OF A DIVINE, I DARE SAY THE CHILD OF A DAEDRA WOULD BE THE MOST LIKELY CANDIDATE.

BUT SADLY MY LETTER CANNOT BE A SIMPLE REASSURANCE THIS TIME. THE EMPEROR AND HIS TOP GENERALS ARE BEGINNING TO BELIEVE THAT THIS WAR MAY BE A MORE IMMINENT THREAT THAN THE THALMOR. IF IT DOES NOT END BY THIS SUMMER, THE EMPIRE’S BEST WILL BE SENT TO RAZE WINDHELM. THAT INCLUDES US.

JOEL IS DELAYING THIS AGREEMENT AS LONG AS POSSIBLE. AS IT IS, IT SHOULD NOT AFFECT THINGS BEFORE YOUR BATTLE WITH ALDUIN ANYWAY. THIS IS NOT YOUR PRIMARY OBJECTIVE, BUT IF YOU DO FIND A WAY TO SETTLE THIS WAR DECISIVELY WITHOUT SO MUCH BLOODSHED, I BEG YOU TO PURSUE IT.

YOU ARE STRONG, YOU ARE BRAVE.

I BELIEVE IN YOU, ALL OF YOU.

DAD

_________________________

Karkat,

Are you fucking crazy????????? I can’t just take off to save your ass! The thieves’ guild is in huge trouble right now! Look, as much as I’d love to help, I don’t think this dragon nonsense is as big as you’re making it!

Fish8oy and I are gonna stay here until we find and kill Karliah. You can talk to the Peixes kid if you want, but don’t hold your breath w8ing for me to join up with you. If Karliah keeps hiding it’s not gonna happen.

Good fucking luck.

Vriska

_________________________

“John,” you say, “We might have a problem.”

He looks up from the last letter, which he had been staring at for like five minutes. “Huh?”

You throw Vriska’s letter down on the table. “Spiderbitch isn’t with us.”
“What? Why not?”

“Because apparently the whole guild is on high alert looking for Karliah.”

“Oh.” He folds his letter and places it in a pouch. “I had the feeling we were forgetting something.”

“No, we’re prioritizing saving the world over petty shit.” You groan and rub your forehead. “John, we only have five weeks left.”

“I know,” he says. “But we have to get Vriska. We should be able to send a letter to the Jarl asking him for help, and then we wouldn’t lose that much time heading to Riften first. Now that some of the snow’s starting to melt it’s only, what, two days from here?”

You groan. “Not like she’s giving us any other choice, huh?”

“Alright then. To Riften it is.”

You make it there by the ninth of First Seed. You’ll be fine, still more than a month to go. You’re not sure why Karkat’s so worried. Skyrim isn’t that big.

Karliah meets you just outside the ragged flagon. “Thank Nocturnal you’re here,” she says. “I fear some people were beginning to suspect me.”

“I’m surprised Mindfang didn’t just call you out,” Karkat says. “I mean, she’s your sister. She had to have recognized you.”

“That’s what really worries me. She hasn’t been around. I’ve kept a close eye and I haven’t seen her coming or going in days. Whatever she’s planning, we need to move quickly.”

“Story of our lives right now,” Karkat grumbles.

“You ready to go?” She asks, ignoring him.

You nod. “Let’s do this.”

Karliah removes her hood and walks forward into the tavern. In a loud, proud voice she says, “My name is Karliah Serket and I am here to tell you of my sister’s betrayal.”

The bar falls silent and everyone turns to stare. Eridan drops his mug and it clatters to the floor.

“What did you say?” Vex asks, standing slowly.

“I have proof that Aranea has betrayed the guild. She killed Gallus and framed me. Since then she’s been stealing from the vault with impunity.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Delven says. “You need two keys to get into that vault. Unless you're suggesting that me or Vriska also turned traitor-”

“That’s ridiculous!” Delven says. “You need two keys to get into that vault. Unless you're suggesting that me or Vriska also turned traitor-”

“She did not need the second key. I can explain later, but read this-” Karliah steps forward, opens Gallus’s journal, and places it and its translation on the table in front of Delven- “And then we can check the vault. If my story is unconvincing, feel free to exact whatever justice you find suitable.”

Delven reads a few pages and his eyes go wide.

The door to the cistern slams open.
“What the ever loving fuck is going on out here?!” Vriska storms forward into the bar. “We’ve got Karliah here, and you’re just standing around.” She draws her sword. “Well, I’m not that way. I’m going to-

“Oi, Vris!” Delven shouts. “I think you need to see this.” He thrusts the piece of paper into Vriska’s hands. She reads a few lines and then throws it down on the table.

“Do you really believe this crap? Look, this is an obvious forgery she made to convince us not to kill her.”

“I don’t think so. You might be too young to recognize it, but that’s definitely Gallus’ handwriting in the book.”

Vriska glances at the journal and scowls. “Come on, the actual thing is gibberish. Karliah clearly just made up what it means. Mindfang would never betray the guild like that.”

“Vriska,” you say, “Please listen to us. When we were up in Snow Veil Sanctum your mom tried to kill me too.”

“John?” She lowers her hand.

“It’s true.” Karkat adds. “She would have gotten him too if I hadn’t been there to stop her. And the journal is just written in the falmer alphabet. The translation’s right. I checked.”

“I-” For a moment there’s uncertainty. She looks between you, Karkat, and Karliah. Then she sheathes her sword and crosses her arms. “I don’t know if I can believe you. You’re an awful liar, Karkat, but maybe she has something on the two of you that’s big enough to get you to fall in line. I need proof.”

“We already gave you the journal,” you say. “What else could we do to convince you?”

“Simple, really.” Karliah says. “Let us check the vault.”

“Fine, let’s.” Vriska huffs, flips her hair and stalks back off into the cistern. “Come on. I’m calling your bluff so now you’d better play it through.”

Karliah laughs softly. You and Karkat look at each other and follow with the rest of the bar.

Vriska and Delven walk forward, place their keys into the doors of the vault, and carefully turn them at the same time. The massive doors swing open surprisingly silently. Inside, the vault is completely empty. All the chests are open with nothing inside but a fine layer of dust. A few bits and pieces are left, but it’s mostly iron or steel weaponry worth next to nothing.

“How?” Delven asks. “It takes two people to…” He turns and snarls at Vriska. “You turned too, didn’t ya?”

“What? I would never-”

“Yeah, and you also said Mindfang would never! No wonder you were fighting so hard in the Flagon. I always knew you were more loyal to your damn mother than you were to the guild!” He grabs her by the neck.

“Oh hell no!” She pulls his arm away and flips him. “You do not treat me like that.” she turns back to the crowd, glaring out and daring anyone else to challenge her. “Look, I knew nothing about this. I thought… I thought she finally trusted me but I guess-” She takes a deep breath. “If I had
been on her side, I would have gone with her. I would know where she was going. But I didn’t and I don’t and she left me again.” She tilts her head downwards and a few strands of hair fall in front of her eyes.

“What she says is true,” Karliah says. “Aranea did not need an accomplice. She has special tools and secrets that would allow her to break into the vault.”

“Well what are they?” Delven asks, pushing himself up off the ground.

“I…” Karliah takes a deep breath. “I am under oath not to say. For now, please just trust me. As you can see, everything I have told you thus far is true. So believe me when I say I am going to bring her back, dead or alive.”

Karliah turns and walks away. The rest of the crowd follows a few moments later, except for Vriska. She just stands in the empty vault looking down at the ground.

You step forward. “Vriska? Are you okay?”

Her head snaps up and you see tears in her eyes. She places her hands on your shoulders and looks through you. “John,” she says, “I need you to tell me everything.”

--

You still don’t want to believe it, but it makes too much sense. Of course she betrayed you all. Of course she did. It’s what she does. Family be damned, right? John is too simple to lie and their story was too complicated to be fake.

Still, it’s probably a tiny pinch of faith that makes you go to her house in the dead of night. You need to see for yourself. It’s overcast so while wearing your guild armor you’re nearly invisible in the shadows. You try the doors first, but they’re barred from the inside. So you go around to the back, and wait for Vald to head inside for a break.

You open the gate with your keys and activate the drawbridge in the back, sneaking up and lifting the ladder before he returns with a sweetroll in hand. Thankfully, the upper door doesn’t have a lock.

Sloppy. Or maybe she just wasn’t expecting someone like you. No, she was expecting you to stay loyal. Well, she should have known better. Like mother like daughter, right?

You use an invisibility potion to sneak past the guards and get to the secret passage in the sitting room. For a thief of your skill it wouldn’t be hard to find anyway, but she fucking showed you where it is.

You get inside the wardrobe and shut it without either guard in the kitchen noticing. Downstairs is her real office. You sit in her chair and rifle through her desk. Most of the records here are of little consequence: old contracts, client information, but then you check the secret compartment under the tabletop. In it you find plans to steal the Eyes of the Falmer. Of course, she’d always been interested and with this one last heist… And if she pulled it off she could set up with a mansion in Daggerfall or Morrowind and no one from the guild would ever find her.

There’s no way you could stop her alone. But maybe you don’t have to. If you talk to Karliah about it, bring in John and Karkat for some extra firepower, hell maybe even take Eridan. He’s kind of a crummy thief, but he knows his way around magic. If all of you go together you might just stand a chance.
Before leaving through the secret escape route, you take the bust of the Grey Fox that had been on her desk. After all, if she’s not part of the guild anymore, finders keepers.

Honestly, you really ought to be used to rude awakenings by now. If it isn’t bandits or wolves or monsters you still have to contend with John’s snoring. But it’s still a shock to wake up to find three people in identical black armor standing in your bedroom.

“Come on, guys!” one of them says, pulling your blanket away. “This is no time to sleep!”

“The middle of the night?” John says. “Because I think by definition it kind of is.”

The voice sounds familiar, and eventually it clicks in your sleep-addled brain. “Vriska? Is that you?” You ask, sitting up.

“Look, we know where Mindfang is going, and we need your help.”

“Why us?” John asks. “ Didn’t you tell us you didn’t even want us around when you were breaking into your mom’s house?”

“Yeah, but this is different.” She takes her mask off. “Look, John, I’m an awesome thief and a pretty good duelist, but I’m not an adventurer. And we have to go dungeon diving.”

“Seriously, Kar. We’re not going blindly into Dwemer ruins.”

“Eridan? Why are you going on this?”

“He’s a heavy hitter,” Vriska says with a shrug.

“Vriska believed him to be the best candidate,” Karliah adds.

“Candidate for what?”

“Ugh, we’ll explain on the way! Just get dressed and meet us at the stables. We have guys saddling the horses already. Now move your asses!”

She throws open the door and storms out. Eridan looks at you for a moment, expression hidden behind his mask, and then follows. Karliah goes last and closes the door behind her with a gentle click.

“Well, good morning,” John says blandly.

You sigh and swing your legs over the side of the bed.

TIRDAS 10TH FIRST SEED 4E202

VRISKA WOKE US UP AT FUCK O’ CLOCK IN THE MORNING TO SET OFF FOR SOME DWEMER RUINS NORTHWEST OF HERE. I KNOW I USED TO ALL BUT SHIT MY PANTS WITH EXCITEMENT AT THE PROSPECT OF GOING IN, BUT I’M KIND OF OVER IT. THANKS TO MOM’S JOURNAL, I HAVE ANSWERS TO A LOT OF MY QUESTIONS. IT WOULD BE NICE TO FIND HER SOMEDAY, BUT I KNOW THAT THE ODDS OF THAT ARE REALLY FUCKING SLIM, AND IT’S NOT LIKE THEY’RE GOING TO LET ME DO ANY PROPER INVESTIGATING TODAY, EVEN IF WE WEREN’T WORRYING ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD IN A MONTH.
ANYWAY, WE ROLLED OUT OF BED, PULLED CLOTHES ON, AND SET OFF IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT. VRISKA BLABBED ON UNTIL SUNRISE ABOUT HOW SHE AND ERIDAN BECAME NIGHTINGALES, SPECIAL MAGICAL GUARDIANS OF NOCTURNAL. NO IDEA WHY IT TOOK HER SO LONG TO SAY “WE WENT TO A SHRINE, GOT SOME COOL ARMOR, AND MADE A DEAL WITH A GOD.” WELL, OKAY, PART OF IT WAS HER EXPLAINING WHY SHE AND ERIDAN WERE THE PERFECT CANDIDATES, BUT REALLY IT’S BECAUSE THEY WERE YOUNG, DUNMER, AND HADN’T PROMISED THEIR SOULS TO ANYONE ELSE YET SO NOCTURNAL WOULD GET MORE SHINE FOR HER SEPTIM OUT OF THE DEAL.

ERIDAN WAS REALLY EXCITED, SO I DECIDED NOT TO MENTION THAT I’VE BEEN CHOSEN BY THREE DAEDRA ALREADY AND JOHN IS BASICALLY MINOR ROYALTY IN OBLIVION. I’M NICE LIKE THAT.

WE’RE GETTING CLOSE, BUT WE TALKED THEM INTO CAMPING OUT OVERNIGHT. THERE’LL BE NO POINT IN GETTING THERE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE IF WE’RE TOO TIRED TO MOVE WHEN WE ACTUALLY GET INSIDE.

Irkngthand is about as hard to find as other dwemer ruins. By which you mean it was basically dancing naked in the middle of the imperial road with a sign saying “look at me! I was made by dwarves!” Even though you’re approaching from the south, and the structures are in a valley on the far side of a hill their little spires stick up over the top.

The five of you dismount and carefully lead your horses down the slope until you reach the highest roof. It looks like some bandits have set up down at the base of the ruins, but as long as you’re careful you shouldn’t attract attention.

John has a couple close calls thanks to his giant noisy armor, but you somehow manage to get through the door without getting spotted. Then it becomes obvious you didn’t get there first.

The room reeks with the stench of death, coming from the corpses of a dozen or so bandits. The cold slowed the decay so you can't be certain, but it looks like it’s been at least a day since Mindfang went through here.

“The fighting will have slowed her down,” Karliah says. “She just can’t bear to let an enemy get away. With any luck, that will mean all we have to contend with is the traps.”

And contend with traps you do. The next room is filled with massive wheels of fire, making you have to time your movements carefully to keep from being burned. The next one has spinning blades that Eridan nearly stumbles into before John yanks him back by the cape.

Yeah, okay, it’s probably a good thing they brought you. Especially because soon you start passing chaurus eggs and chitin huts, so you'll have to deal with some falmer sooner or later. Then you find them and, well, maybe you'll get away with not fighting them either.

There are a few massive fires throughout the chamber, and all of the falmer seem to have gathered around them. Some individuals, still wearing their armor, break away from the group to take a body and place it almost reverently into the flames. A female falmer stands on an elevated platform near each pyre, making loud gutteral noises.

Vriska nudges you and whispers “Karkat? What’s going on?”

“I mean, it looks like they’re having funerals.”
“Yeah, okay, great, but why aren’t we moving?”

“Oh, right, sorry.”

She rolls her eyes. “Come on, Karkles, play anthropologist on your own time.”

You scowl at her, but begin to lead your team forward, sticking to the edges of the chamber to minimize your chances of getting caught. But at the end of the room is a massive gate, obviously opened by some type of mechanism you can’t see. And to make it worse there’s a massive fire right in front of it.

“What do we do now?” Eridan asks.

“We look for levers,” you whisper. "That's usually how dwemer operate their gates."

“There!” Vriska breathes.

She sneaks off to the left. You watch as she slinks past the falmer and throws a switch on a ledge above. The gate still stands firm. One set of gears has begun to turn, but there’s another set on the right side of the gate. Karliah notices it at about the same time you do, and with even more finesse than her niece she reaches the other one.

By the time she actually gets there the gears on the left have stopped turning. Luckily, Vriska is still standing by her lever, so she throws it again. The gate opens. So now you just have to figure out how to get past the falmer. Preferably without killing any of them.

Great.

“We need a distraction,” you murmur to yourself.

“On it,” John replies.

He turns to the entrance of the room and shouts. For a moment you panic, but then you realize that somehow the sound was coming from nowhere nearby.

The falmer run off to the room’s entrance, leaving the gate unguarded.

“That a new one?” you ask.

“Picked it up back in Shearpoint, but there wasn’t a good time to use it."

“I like it.”

Vriska and Karliah leap down from their ledges and together the five of you continue moving forward.

The next few rooms are fairly standard. There are traps and falmer and chaurus, though not as many of the latter two as you would have expected. But then again, maybe that shouldn’t be a surprise. Every room you pass has some sign Mindfang came through, and you find corpses, open chests, shattered automatons, or some combination of the three. One of the rooms even has the fresh remains of a camp on a high ledge. When you touch the coals of the campfire they’re still a bit warm. You’re catching up.

It looks like you might actually have a good chance to catch her. That is, until the ruins begin to shake and collapse.
“What’s going on?” Vriska hisses.

“Hell if I know! They don’t normally do this,” you reply.

“We’re getting near the end,” Karliah says. “I can feel it.”

“I hope so,” John says, “or else this entire place might come crashing down on our heads.”

“Hang on,” Eridan whispers. “You hear that?”

“I hear the sound of the Falmer panicking in the other room if that’s what you mean,” you growl.

“No, shut up. There’s water running through the pipes above us. We must be under a lake.”

“So instead of being crushed we’ll just drown,” Vriska scoffs.

He frowns, visibly drooping a bit. “Look, knowin’ the terrain has got to be helpful.”

She snorts. “I know you’re trying to keep up, but just leave the real work to us, okay?”

Eridan starts to reply, but Karliah cuts him off with a gasp. "By Nocturnal…"

You catch up to Karliah to see what she’s looking at and that... that’s something. A fifty foot statue of an elf sits cross-legged above a pool of water. Mindfang hangs from its face, pickaxe in hand as she pries the massive jewels of the statue’s eyes free.

“She hasn’t seen us yet,” Karliah whispers. “We should still be able to-”

“Ticked you long enough,” Mindfang says.

“Or perhaps not.” Karliah straightens up and calls out, “Aranea, set down your weapon and come quietly.”

“Hmm... how about no?” She turns her eye on you and John.

Vriska is horrible. She’s always been a liar and cheat. Mindfang taking down the guild is a blessing. You have to let her get away. You draw your sickles and turn towards Vriska.

"Karkat?" John asks. "What are you doing?"

"What I should have done before we let her drag us through all this!" You leap forward.

John lets out a low curse and summons his hammer, locking the long handle with your sickles.

"What's gotten into you?!”

"It's Aranea!" Karliah has her hands pressed against her temples. "She's trying to control you! I'm barely fighting her off myself, but you have to try!"

That's a lie. Deep in your heart you know that's a lie.

"That's dumb! Why wouldn't she pick John? Now get out of the way!" you pull back just a little.

"Wait, that's her? Oh, that makes sense." He's still standing between you and Vriska. You need to kill Vriska, more than you've ever needed anything.

"John," you say, "Don't make me hurt you!"
"Shit, Karkat, listen to me!" You lunge at him and he parries again. "What you're thinking isn't you! It isn't real!"

You don't listen to him. Of course it's you. You know your own thoughts. Get Vriska. "Bullshit!"

"I'm being serious! It might be talking in your head but it's not your voice."

You charge again and he shouts, knocking you back a good ten feet.

"Shit, this isn't working," John says as you stagger to your feet. "Vriska, go. Get Mindfang. I'll keep Karkat busy."

Vriska nods and leaps forward, drawing her sword. Mindfang smirks and parries.

Mindfang needs to win, you need to help her. Wait, why would you want to help Mindfang? She's also a bitch. Well yeah, but Vriska's more of a bitch, right? But you were friends.

"There you go," John says softly. "What she's saying doesn't make sense. Remember who you are, why we came here."

You put your sickles away and clutch your head.

"It's okay," He slowly starts approaching you.

He's going to attack. Defend yourself.

No he won't. It's John. John wouldn't hurt you.

I said defend yourself!

The thought has a different echo to it. It feels weird, foreign. He was right. But you still need to fight- No. No, that's that other voice.

"How isn't this affecting you?" You grit out.

"I'm used to it. But don't worry about me. Worry about yourself, remember what your own voice sounds like."

You close your eyes and try with all you have to focus.

"You know, part of me was hoping it would end like this," Your mother says, turning her sword over in her hand. "It's all quite dramatic. Perfect for the two of us, don't you agree?"

To your left, one of the massive golden pipes bursts, letting a torrent of water out. You instinctively turn to look, and Mindfang takes that chance to leap at you. You manage to see her out of the corner of your eye and block just in time.

"Never take your eyes off of your opponent, my dear," She says, “I thought I taught you better than that.”

You manage to push her back. “You didn’t teach me shit!” You run forward. “All you did was leave me and then start taking advantage of me once I found you!”

She sidesteps, and you tumble to the ground. “Tsk, come now, Vriska. Everything I did was because I trust you.”
You feel her power begin poking at the edge of your psyche, trying to get a grip. You growl, pushing her magic off with your own. “Don’t play your mind games with me!”

“Oh, Vriska...” She sheathes her sword so she can reach out to you. “Come with me. I knew you’d make it, and I knew you’d bring that traitor to me. Now let’s finish her together.”

She looks sincere and this... this kind of convoluted plot is like her. Maybe, just maybe... You take her hand and she smiles. Then she uses the grip to throw you off the statue. You hear her cackling as you plummet into the water.

“I can’t believe you fell for that!” She says as you surface. “You must be the most foolish-”

Then there’s the sound of an ice blast, and the tip of a bolt comes through her chest, stained red with blood.

“No,” Eridan says, blue energy in his hands. “I think you are.” She touches the ice, and then crumples in the statue’s arms.

The moment the ice bolt hits Mindfang, everything becomes clear again.

John rushes to the edge of the water. “Vriska, are you okay?!”

“I’m fine,” she says, paddling to shore. “But how do we get out of here?”

More pipes burst, and the water level begins to visibly rise.

You turn back towards the doors, but they’ve locked behind you. Maybe there’s some sort of exit up above? You run to the top of the statue, but all you see is Eridan going over Mindfang’s body. He gathers the eyes of the falmer and some weird ornate hair pin in his arms and shoves them into a satchel.

“Hey, wanna stop scavenging for long enough to find a way we can not die?”

He glares at you, but then straightens up and begins to look around.

“Wait, I got it!” John says. He readies fire in one hand and ice in the other, and alternatively blasts one particular section of rock with each spell.

“What the hell are you doing?” Vriska demands.

“There’s a big crack right there,” John replies. “If I keep heating it up and cooling it, eventually...”

A boulder tumbles down, and through the hole you can see a sliver of light. Time to go.

The tunnel is a short one, but it leads you back outside. You stand, sopping wet, at the edge of the cave, looking out at the setting sun.

“So what now?” John asks.

“The Skeleton key must be returned to the Twilight Sepulcher,” Karliah says. Someone must walk the pilgrim’s path and enter the shrine.”

You and John look at each other nervously. That’s usually the part that leads to “hey, dragonborn, you and your friend have nothing better to do, right? Riiight?”
“I’ll do it,” Vriska says. “After all Mindfang did, I think I have to redeem our family in Nocturnal’s eyes.”

“Good answer,” Karliah says, smiling. “I think the guild will do well under its new master.”

“What?” like three of you say at the same time.

“Aranea was training you to be her replacement, was she not? When you return, by all rights the position is yours.”

“I- I won’t let you down!” Vriska says, grinning from ear to ear.

“Here,” Eridan says, handing her the hairpin thing. “You’re gonna need this.”

“You’re not coming with me?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “To be honest, this ain’t really my thing. Besides, somebody’s gotta take this loot back to start refilling the treasury.”

“And you two,” Karliah says, turning to you. “Thank you for all you’ve done. None of this would have been possible without your help. You will always have friends in the guild.”

“You’re welcome! It was no problem!” John says.

You give him a look.

“Oh right! Vriska, are you gonna come help us fight Lord English now?” he asks excitedly.

“Yeah, and feel free to count Feferi and Eridan in now too. I’m sure I can get them to come, right Eridan?”

“As long as there aren’t any more ruins involved,” he grumbles.

“I can’t make that promise,” you say. “But to be fair, I think by now you kinda owe me.”

“You know,” Karliah says. “I think there’s an inn nearby. If we move quickly, we ought to be able to make it there before it gets too late.”

And, yeah, beds sounds like a pretty good idea.

———

john: *gasp*

KARKAT: OH NO...

john: can we go get the dog? please, please, please?

KARKAT: YES, LET'S STOP OUR WORLD-SAVING MISSION AND SPEND ONE OF THE
FEW WEEKS WE HAVE LEFT CROSSING THE COUNTRY AT A BREAK-NECK PACE IN ORDER TO FIND SOME MUTT THAT MAY OR MAY NOT EVEN BE THERE. THAT’S A FAN-FUCKING-TASTIC IDEA.

john: you could have just said no :’(

KARKAT: DO NOT GIVE ME THAT LOOK, JOHN EGBERT. I KNOW YOU MISS YOUR DOGS BUT-

john: ’((((((((

KARKAT: *LONG-SUFFERING SIGH* FINE. AFTER WE SAVE THE WORLD WE CAN GET YOU A DOG. MAYBE EVEN THAT DOG.

john: karkat, you are the best!!! :D
Kynareth's Breath it's good to be home. Or at least as close to home as Skyrim will ever really feel. Your key slides easily into the lock and you turn it, letting yourself and Karkat into your house. It smells like herbs, and you see leaves hanging to dry in the kitchen. Lydia's nowhere to be seen, but that's okay. It's not like you needed any help, and you're not really feeling up for small talk at the moment.

You and Karkat lug your bags upstairs. Understandably, there's no water for you guys, so Karkat runs out to the well and leaves you to get your gear sorted and put away. Upon examination, it looks like your armor's gonna need some maintenance. It picked up some dents at some points, and you don't want to give an enemy that extra opening. You leave that out to remind yourself to stop by the blacksmith and take your remaining provisions down to the kitchen. You also take a while to debate if two particularly disgusting kerchiefs are at all salvageable or if they really just need to be burned.

Still, it shouldn't take him this long to just get some water. You've run out of things to do other than sit, but your tunic and trousers are full of road dust and you don't want to mess up the bed, so you strip down to your shift. It's a little sweaty, but not bad enough that you'd worry about the blankets. Your travelling clothes go in a pile on the floor with the other dirty stuff. You'll have to ask Lydia to get them washed before you leave again.

Of course, you're not sure when you'll be leaving. Tomorrow you'll be one month away from your battle with Alduin- English- whatever. Should you risk going back out? Should you sit on your hands and do what training you can? Your stomach ties itself in a knot just thinking about it.

Thankfully, then you hear the door open. "Sorry that took so long!" Karkat hollers. "I stopped by Acadia's on the way."

"For what?"

"To sell some of those extra two-handed potions." By this time he's up to the bedroom door. He's got a whole bucket full of water with him. "It's not like you ever use them."

"Makes sense."

He carefully pours some of the water into the washbasin and you strip the rest of the way. He startles a little when he turns back around to see you naked.

"Fuck! You're eager today."
"Yeah, we need to get to the Jarl. It's kind of important, remember?"

"Oh! Right," he blushes, looks away, and starts fiddling with his own belt.

You love that little blush. It suits him. "Did you have other plans?" You ask, knowing fully what the answer will be.

"N-no! I just- uh…" By this point the tips of his ears have gone pink. Hehe, what a cutie! "I might have picked some stuff up at Acadia's too."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Like maybe… I might have picked up some Summerset Slick." His voice drifts off to little more than a whisper but you hear it clearly enough.

That… That's the good stuff. Expensive too, if you remember correctly. He pulls the vial from his pouch and sets it on the nightstand. Holy shit. He won't make eye contact with you. Holy shit. He actually wants to fuck you. Or maybe for you to fuck him. Either way, you feel a pang race down, a little bit of heat start to coil in your belly.

You swallow. But you're not gonna have time now. Not if you want to make it to see the Jarl today. Well, fuck, you're gonna be distracted the entire time you're at Dragonsreach. Come on, John, get yourself under control.

Of course, it's not easy to focus on anything else when Karkat's looking blushy and nervous and... Well you could always try riling him up a different way. Instead you come close and put your arms around him. "Don't worry," you purr, "We can have some fun later."

He swallows. "Oh?"

"Yeah. Sometime after we're clean!" You go back to your normal voice and yank his tunic and shift up over his head. But because he wasn't expecting it, his arms get all tangled up for a second. You take a step back and laugh, enjoying the view as his muscles ripple with his attempts to get free. Okay, no, that's still a little bit too hot.

Once his shirts are off he glares at you, his bushy eyebrows scrunched up together and reminding you of two adorable caterpillars. Okay, that's better. Any beginning of a boner he might have had is dead and you can't stop laughing. He growls and throws his clothes at your face. Some road dust gets into your lungs and your laugh turns into a choked cough.

"Serves you right," he grumbles.

You lightly toss the garments into the pile with your own while he yanks his pants down with more vitriol than would be possible for any other person on earth. It's adorable, but because you value your relationship and your life you stay silent and start washing yourself.

Even if it would be way better to do this in a steamy room and soak for a while afterwards, it's kind of nice to do this in your own house. No monsters, no other people to sneak up on you, just getting the filth off of your skin. Just like always, you didn't realize quite how bad it was until you actually started getting clean. You were practically gray before, and it shows in the water. You have to dump the basin out and refill it like three times before you and Karkat decide you're clean enough. There's still probably dirt stuck in your hair and you wouldn't be surprised if you missed a spot, but at least you're back to being a healthy shade of brown and Karkat's gone from lead to silver. You manage to keep it together and not at all sexual, thank the Divines.
The two of you shave, put on some marginally nicer (and at least clean) clothes and head up to Dragonsreach. It'll be nice to actually be presentable in front of the Jarl. The guards recognize you and let you pass without question. Inside you see Lydia at one of the long banquet tables, chatting with Irileth. You wave and smile and she stands to bow for the two of you.

"Welcome back, my thane. And to you as well, Karkat."

"Thanks!" you say. "But seriously, John's fine."

"Yeah. Hey, do you know where the Jarl is?" Karkat asks. "We kind of need to talk to him."

"He is speaking with Proventus on the Great Porch," Irileth replies, getting to her feet. "I will take you to him."

You and Karkat thank her and all four of you head behind the throne, up a short flight of stairs, and up a set of double doors to… well, a great porch. You can practically see all of Whiterun from here, the vast plains reaching out to the mountains. High above you hangs a massive wooden yoke, suspended from the vaulted ceiling by thick iron shackles. That has to be the trap Pyralspite was talking about. You're not sure exactly how it could hold a dragon, but it looks just about big enough.

The Jarl sits with his back to you, a silver goblet in his left hand. Proventus stands to his right, and both are staring out over the land.

"My Jarl," Irileth says, "One of your thanes, John Egbert, and his companion are here to see you."

"Thank you, Irileth. You are dismissed. John, Karkat, you may come forward." He makes a beckoning gesture.

You and Karkat cross the massive porch.

"Have a seat," the Jarl says as you get close.

The two of you look at each other and then walk around the table to sit facing him, your backs to the huge opening.

"I presume you are here to speak to me about the contents of your letter," he says.

"Yes," you say, snapping the right accent back on. "Have you considered the proposition?"

"I have." He takes a long sip from his goblet. "But I also have a question for you. Have you considered how many people live in this city?"

"Huh?" Karkat asks. You kick him under the table.

"Three hundred thousand," the Jarl continues. "As of the last census, three hundred thousand innocent men, women, and children dwelt within Whiterun's walls, and many thousands more worked the land around them. With the war I know our numbers have dwindled, and with the dragon attacks more have been slaughtered, but what you are suggesting puts every individual that remains in grave danger."

"I know," you say. "We were at Helgen. We saw what a dragon can do to a city."

"And yet you want to bring one here."

"But Dragonsreach has a trap," you point out. "And it held a dragon for decades before."
"So the legends say."

"With all due respect, Jarl Balgruuf," you say. "Unless we stop it this is going to be the end of the world. If that happens, everyone in Whiterun is going to die anyway."

"I do not doubt your honesty, nor the goodness of your intentions. But without proof I will not gamble my people's survival on the truth of an old story."

"Please," Karkat starts, "we need-" but the Jarl silences him with a gesture.

"Follow me," he says. He stands and begins walking away from the table. You and Karkat get back up and follow. He leads you under the roof and then up a set of stairs to the left. They bring you up to a platform on the same level as the yoke.

"I know it looks impressive from the ground, but look at this 'trap' from up here." He lifts a hand and points towards the machine. "The chains are rusted. The turning mechanism is broken. The beam has massive cracks in it. My grandfather told me he had never once seen it move. If the old myths are true, Olaf one-eye was able to use this once nearly five thousand years ago. The only reason it is still up there is we have no safe way of removing it."

"So that's it?" Karkat asks. "You're not going to help us?"

"I would, were it possible. But your plan will not work."

"What if we fix the trap?" you suggest. "My cousin's really good with old machines and-"

"Manuscripts tell us how the mechanism was built," the Jarl says, cutting you off. "Restoring it would be incredibly expensive, but admittedly not impossible. I do not know if your companion will understand, John, but you know something of the complexities of governing. Whiterun continues to operate for now, but both men and gold are in short supply. We maintain an uneasy peace with both the Stormcloaks and the Imperials, and so my troops are spread throughout my hold. Refugees pour in from the rest of Skyrim, and though in time they may be able to replace the peasants lost to this damnable conflict, their immediate need for alms is tremendous. Unless Ulfric Stormcloak were to surrender or the Emperor cede Skyrim in the next few weeks, there is nothing we can do."

"So there's still a chance," you say.

He snorts. "The chance of a snowflake in The Deadlands."

"What if… What if we stop the war?" Karkat asks.

Jarl Balgruuf looks at him with amusement. "And how do you plan to do that? Battlemages may be incredibly powerful, but I believe you and I both know the 'one man army' claim is a bit of an exaggeration."

"He's right," you say. "And even if he wasn't it's not like we'd have the time."

"So we don't fight," Karkat crosses his arms and smirks. "Ulfric's a brute and an idiot, but he's the self-proclaimed nordliest nord that's ever nордеd."

"So?" You ask.

"Are you suggesting-" Jarl Balgruuf starts.
"Yeah. If he likes tradition so much, we call for a Season Unending."

"What's that?" you ask.

"Ancient Nordic thing," he says. "The only time you can get warlords to sit down for a second."

"To be a bit more precise," the Jarl adds, "It is an ancient rite that has not been done since the time of Talos. Should the jarls of Skyrim be in a deadlock over who is to be the new high king, a summit is called at the Throat of the World and the greybeards decide the victor. It was more common when we were an independent nation, as the Emperor now decides such things. But reinstating this tradition may not be a bad idea. Ulfric may have left the greybeards, but he respects them."

"What about the Imperials?" you ask. "I don't think they'll be too happy about going back to that way of doing it."

"Likely not. But if they learn this was arranged by an Imperial noble and a dark elf that has suffered in Ulfric's capitol, they may be inclined to think they have the advantage.""Shit," Karkat says, "I didn't think of that. Maybe Ulfric won't come after all."

"Not if we don't tell him," you smile. "I mean, if we have Jarl Balgruuf invite him but I invite Tullius, that could work. I don't think the two of them chat often enough to figure that out."

"I think it may be the best chance you have," Jarl Balgruuf says. "I believe it may also be prudent to invite Lady Elisif. As widow of the former High King, I believe her approval will help quell the other Jarls who have sided with the Imperials. As the only neutral Jarl, I shall come as well."

"What do you think?" Karkat asks.

"I think the more Jarls who agree to this the more people will accept it," you reply. "I don't think the monastery is big enough for everyone, but two more people won't be a problem."

The Jarl nods with an air of finality. "Very well, we shall attempt to call a Season Unending. If you do secure a steady peace, I shall call back my guards, repair the trap, and we can attempt this plan of yours."

You grin from ear to ear. Your heart feels like it's about to beat its way out of your ribcage. "Really?!"

"You have my word as a Jarl and son of Skyrim."

"Oh my gosh! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Your accent is slipping. You don't even care.

The Jarl smiles at you. "Good luck, and may Talos guide you."

SUNDAS 15TH FIRST SEED, 4E202

SO, WE GOT JARL ULFRIC'S LETTER TODAY. AND LIKE WE THOUGHT HE'S BEING A DICK ABOUT IT. HE REFUSES TO COME SIT AT THE TABLE UNTIL WE FIND OUT IF GENERAL TULLIUS WILL BE THERE.

HE WROTE ALL THIS POETIC SHIT ABOUT NOT LETTING ELVES DICTATE THE FATES OF MEN, AND HOW HE WAS FIGHTING FOR ALL HIS DEAD COMRADES AND
SO WE SENT OFF ANOTHER LETTER, SAYING THAT TULLIUS WOULD, IN FACT, BE COMING, EVEN THOUGH IT'LL PROBABLY TAKE ANOTHER DAY FOR HIS LETTER TO GET HERE. I JUST HOPE HE SAYS YES. JOHN SEEMS CONFIDENT HE WILL. HE WROTE THE LETTER AND HE KNOWS WHAT THE LEGION WANTS TO HEAR. I JUST HOPE IT'S ENOUGH.

WE ALSO CALLED DAVE'S BIRD SO WE COULD SEND A MESSAGE TO ROSE ABOUT IT. I MEAN, I KNOW SHE'S BUSY DEALING WITH THE EYE OF MAGNUS THING, BUT HONESTLY I'M SCARED. I CAN BARELY BE POLITE, MUCH LESS DIPLOMATIC, AND I KNOW JOHN KNOWS HIS SHIT BUT THERE'S A LOT HANGING IN THE BALANCE HERE. ROSE IS SMART AND SHE'S GOT POISE OF DIBELLA AND AKATOSH'S BABY. HOPEFULLY CAN AT LEAST DO SOMETHING TO HELP US.

THESE LAST FEW DAYS HAVE BEEN AWFUL. WE'RE JUST SITTING AROUND IN WHITERUN, HOPING EVERY COURIER THAT WALKS THROUGH THE GATE HAS SOMETHING FOR US. MOST OF THEM DON'T.

WE STOPPED BY JORRVASKR A COUPLE OF TIMES, BUT CAT PUNS GET OLD QUICK AND I CAN'T HANDLE TOO MUCH OF NEPETA OR EQUIUS RIGHT NOW. AT LEAST JOHN AND I ARE GOOD AT DISTRACTING EACH OTHER AT HOME. ESPECIALLY SINCE I FIGURED OUT HOW TO MAKE MORE OF THAT SLICK MYSELF AND JOHN'S MORE CREATIVE THAN HE LETS ON. HOLY SHIT.

I ALMOST FEEL BAD FOR LYDIA. ALMOST.

mornadas 16th first seed, 4e202

two pieces of good news today! first we got a letter from tullius saying he's coming. and it seems like he'd be happy to negotiate a longer lasting peace as opposed to a "hey, put your swords down for like two seconds so we can keep the world from ending," which is all we thought we could get. and then if we pull that off i don’t have to worry about the emperor sending us to end the war the other way. also, he's agreed to bring me back my old armor!!! i missed it so bad. the ebony is nice, but it's so heavy and bulky!

also dave's bird made it back already! (he was also very excited about lydia's pie). rose says that they've been at kind of a dead end over in solstheim, and she's happy to take a break to come help with this.

but for now we have five days to get our stuff together and get there. i can't stop thinking about the million ways this could go wrong. shit, karkat must be rubbing off on me.

Today is the day. And for the first time in your life, you actually feel torn on what to wear. Normally you don't give a flying fuck, but with the stakes this high you'd do just about anything to tip the scales in your favor. And if you've got a terminal case of foot in mouth disease, you can at least do everyone the favor of looking presentable. You look more official in your elven armor, but it's uncomfortable after a few hours (and it'll probably be extra uncomfortable today. Thanks for last night, John) and it might send the wrong message to Ulfric. On the other hand, your nice clothes are pretty decent and a lot easier to move in, but is it going to be good enough for this meeting? John keeps assuring you it'll be okay, and you want to believe him, but you know that for some incomprehensible reason he's too smitten with you to be objective.
Ugh, it's all so fucking confusing and complicated! It's just goddamn clothes! This was easier the first time you talked to Balgruuf when your choice was show up in leather armor or naked. John, of course, has his expert robes of conjuration, which is kind of a happy medium between fancy and powerful. You find yourself wishing more than anything that Kanaya was here. She would have the world’s strongest opinion in about a tenth of a second.

Maybe if you're lucky she'll show up with Rose? But then you'll be up the mountain and it'll be too late. Hmm.

As it is, you don't set off until nearly noon (eventually you settle on the armor in case there's a fight. With Ulfric that's a real possibility), but, thanks to your horse, the ride up is pretty easy. It's hard to say if you run into less trouble because the wolves and frost trolls have learned to avoid you, or if you've just made that big of a dent in the population with all the times you've climbed this fucking mountain. Either way, you make it to High Hrothgar just in time, even with your late start.

Arngeir waits for you just inside the door. Instead of some sort of reasonable greeting, his first words to you are, "I never should have agreed to this."

"Don't worry," John says, "I'm sure it'll all be fine!"

“And too late to take it back now anyway,” you mutter.

"I know, but the greybeards have been apolitical for centuries. I do not know if there was ever a worse time to reverse this stance!"

"If we want to stop Alduin," John says, "we have to stop this war first."

Arngeir sighs. "I know, I know. And Pyralspite has agreed to help you, so we shall do what we can. I just hope it will be enough."

"Ehh, stop worrying so much!" Terezi says, breezing in from the next room.

"Terezi? Are you sitting in too?" John asks.

"I mean, someone has to be down here representing the leader of the Greybeards, given that she can't fit her scaly butt in this building."

You groan. "Oh gods, does that mean you're directing the meeting?"

"Well, I only know the best suggestions to make about everything to everyone to get people to leave happy. Of course having me in charge would be a dumb idea, right?" Her words are less dripping with sarcasm, more like each syllable unleashes a torrent of sarcasm that would be strong enough to wash away an entire village.

"Look, I didn't mean it that way, I just-"

She pats you on the shoulder. "Karkat, it's fine. I can absolutely seriousface when I need to. Just trust me. Oh! And make sure to think really, really hard about Ulfric's face when he sees us. Because it's going to be absolutely priceless!" She cackles.

"Anyway," Arngeir says, "Tullius and the three Jarls you've invited are all present. I think it's about time for the rest of us to-"

"Not so fast." Delphine enters, fully dressed in her Blades gear. Esbern follows behind her. Great.
This is exactly what you needed to keep things civil.

"What in blazes are you doing here?" Arngeir demands.

"We have every right to be at this meeting as you, if not more."

"Oh really," you say flatly. "Then how 'come we aren't doing this in your little basement?"

"We were the ones who put the dragonborn on his current path," she says, crossing her arms. "If it were up to you Greybeards, he would have spent all his time here speaking to the sky or whatever it is you do."

"Alright, fine, we don't have time for this bickering," Arngeir huffs. "But you cannot say anything to insult Tullius or the people he has brought with him. The situation is tense as it is, and we do not need things to become even more complex than they already are."

"I will accept that. But if there is something that compromises the dragonborn's mission, I will certainly not hold my tongue."

"Um," John says. "I'm right here?"

"I'm well aware," Delphine says, "But it always helps to have someone more aware of the full situation."

John purses his lips but doesn't say anything.

"Okay, we ready to start this thing?" Terezi asks, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Because I would love to start this thing."

"The others are seated inside already," Arngar said. "If the rest of you will proceed to the council chamber we can begin."

He leads you through the monastery until you reach a room with a massive stone table. Ulfric is some weird combination of slack-jawed and snarling when you and Terezi enter. You try to memorize his face for its own sake, but Terezi snickers. Oh good, apparently she saw it too.

…You hope she hasn't been reading your mind like your entire life. That would be super awkward. No, she would have capitalized on that by now.

"Damn right I would have," she whispers to you.

"You? What in the name of Talos are you doing here?" Ulfric demands.

Terezi grins evilly and bows with a flourish. "Well, I am here on behalf of my mistress, Pyralspite, leader of the Greybeards." She straightens and puts on an exaggerated frown. "You of all people really ought to know that she wouldn't be able to make it in herself. As for Mister Vantas here, he's been the Dragonborn's companion since Helgen."

"And I see the rumors of us having an Imperial dragonborn are true as well," He says, drumming his fingers on the table. "Though, for the sake of posterity, I would appreciate if you could prove you actually are the Dragonborn."

John shrugs and does his unrelenting force shout, missing Ulfric, but sending all of the cups, parchment, and quills flying. Thankfully, all the inkwells were still capped and only two of them broke.
"Smooth," You say.

"Hey, that's the one most people have heard of."

"I would hope my word would have been enough, Ulfric," Jarl Balgruuf tuts.

"Perhaps if you had joined me it would have been. But I suppose unless we bring a dragon here for him to slay this is the best proof I will get."

"Good, then may we begin?" Asks an Altmer at the far end of the table.

"Wait," John says, slapping on his proper accent. "May I first ask who you are?"

"Ah, how rude of me," says an old Imperial in very high-ranking regalia. You assume it must be Tullius. "This is Elenwen, First Emissary of the Thalmor in Skyrim."

"Most of us know damn well who she is," Ulfric counters. "But now that everyone is present, I want to know what she's doing here."

"I am sitting in on this meeting to ensure that no aspect of the White-Gold Concordat is breached by any decisions made here." She replies, giving him a haughty look.

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Terezi says. "My first job here is to make sure things stay civil, but you have my word I will also ensure any and all decisions reached at this summit are absolutely legal. The Thalmor will be able to work with whoever rules Skyrim after a decision is made, but I am afraid that this is an internal affair, one that, given the third clause of the second term of the White-Gold Concordat, we are legally allowed to resolve without the input of the Aldmeri Dominion."

Huh, okay. Maybe she wasn’t joking about the seriousface thing. Then again, this is about law and justice, and Terezi is Terezi.

Elenwen frowns. "What do you think, General?"

"I agree," Tullius says. "My first job here is to make sure things stay civil, but you have my word I will also ensure any and all decisions reached at this summit are absolutely legal. The Thalmor will be able to work with whoever rules Skyrim after a decision is made, but I am afraid that this is an internal affair, one that, given the third clause of the second term of the White-Gold Concordat, we are legally allowed to resolve without the input of the Aldmeri Dominion."

She huffs. "Alright then. I shall take my leave. Farewell and may your decisions be swift." She leaves, shutting the door behind her.

"Alright, now that that's decided, everyone please take your seats," Terezi says, gesturing just a bit to the left of where the table actually is. She sits at the head of the table, and you and John uneasily take the two chairs on the far end.

"Hah, a fine start," Says Ulfric as he takes his seat. "We shall bend to no elf today!"

"I find your implication distasteful, Jarl Ulfric," General Tullius says. "The Empire is not part of the Aldmeri dominion now, nor will it ever be."

"Sure it's not." Ulfric says sarcastically.

Terezi knocks her cane against the ground. "Jarl Ulfric, please refrain from using that sort of tone and making goading comments during these negotiations. Also, if you haven't noticed, I'm also an elf and as the representative of the leader of the Greybeards I shall be facilitating this meeting. I require no bowing, but I must ask you to defer to me for these proceedings."
"You'll be- I have to object. I accepted these conditions because the Greybeards are known for their neutrality. As a Dark Elf known for associating with certain rabble-rousers and known political opposition to me from before the war, you cannot be a suitable candidate for moderator."

"Holy shit," John whispers, "I thought Jake was the only person who still said ‘rabble-rousers.’" You shush him.

"Everybody's from somewhere," Balgruuf says. "And if memory serves, you were once a greybeard yourself. I’m surprised you find this arrangement so distasteful."

"Jarl Ulfric," Tullius says, "Let's cut to the chase. What would it take for you to stop this war?"

"Nothing short of liberty for Skyrim and her people," he says firmly.

Tullius scoffs. "I knew this was a waste of time."

Ulfric glares at him. "I will, however, compromise for a short truce, until the Dragon crisis has ended."

"Thank you," Terezi says. "And what will you need for that?"

"Imperials must surrender Markarth to me."

"That's ridiculous!" Jarl Elisif exclaims. "Ulfric wants to steal at the table what he cannot rightfully take in battle."

"Perhaps... you could make some sort of trade?" John suggests. "Something like... Giving Markarth for a hold that the Stormcloaks have?"

Pfft, yeah right. They'll never go for that. It makes no sense whatsoever. John, what were you even thinking?! You'll never be able to-

"I suppose that could be acceptable for now." Tullius says. "But the question is which one."

Oh. Maybe… maybe he does know what he’s doing?

"Erm... Riften, maybe?"

Okay, no, he’s making it up as he goes along. But at least that seems like a reasonable-

"That's preposterous!" Ulfric roars, "With its port and fisheries, Riften is far more economically important!"

Fuck. Maybe you should just stop thinking.

"Perhaps," Tullius says, "But Markarth is a fortress, capturing it would require a long and very costly siege."

"Well what else do you have?" Elisif asks. "We shan't trade for somewhere so small as Winterhold, even if he handed over his entire treasury"

"And I would like to take this time to remind the dragonborn that I still have a few particular items he had asked for me to bring," Tullius adds. "It would be a shame if Legate Rikke and I were to forget to return them because of disappointment at the terms of this deal."

"Are you threatening us?" You growl.
"Well, then," Ulfric says, rising "I suppose that is it. If the Dragonborn's judgment is clouded by blackmail or bribery or whatever you Imperials have on him, I will not allow him to dictate the fate of Skyrim. Even if you were to return whatever you have, this is further proof that everything is stacked in the Empire's favor here. This conference was a waste of time. We will decide this in the proper way: on the battlefield."

"No," John pleads, “Lo- Jarl Ulfric, we just need a temporary ceasefire to-

"Enough!" Ulfric says. "I knew from the moment I entered this room you would side with them. Perhaps the dragonborns of old did what was best for Skyrim, but I should have known better than to think an Imperial would do the same."

You open your mouth to try to come up with something, anything, though preferably something that won’t piss him off, like that's something you’d actually be capable of, but then the doors swing open. In walks Rose, dressed in a brilliant golden gown that shimmers with each step she takes.

"You started early," She says. "I knew you would, but there's only so much someone of my position can do about these things."

"Who let this girl in?" Tullius demands. “How did you even get up this mountain?!"

"I was invited. And a good thing too, it appears as though this meeting was about to fall apart." Terezi scoots over and allows Rose to take a seat at the head of the table. "Now sit back down, Jarl Ulfric. There are a few more points we've yet to discuss."

Ulfric's general snarls at her. "He does not take orders from a child!"

"I wouldn’t expect him to," Rose replies with a cool and even tone, "But I am no child, and I had simply thought he would, perhaps, be willing to take a friendly suggestion from the archmage of the College at Winterhold."

"And we are meant to believe that's you?" Elisif asks with a snort.

"Indeed."

"I mean, she is," you say.

Ulfric looks at you skeptically, but sits back down. "I am still not convinced this is not another trick."

"And that's fine with me," Rose says. "I do not ask for your belief in my credentials, only to listen to what I have to say, for there are other factors at play it would be foolish to ignore. After all, your two armies are not the only two powerful factions in Skyrim. There is, of course, my college. With the dissolution of the Mage's guild after the Great War, almost all of the Empire’s best and brightest come to us, so we have quite the talent pool at our disposal. Then there are also the Companions, the Thieves Guild, and the Dark Brotherhood. And they all have one thing in common. Can you guess what that is?"

"None of them have taken a side thus far," General Tullius says.

"Exactly."

"Oh right," John says. "I suppose that too."

Rose smirks. "Mind to tell us the other thing?"
"Well, I had been thinking that Karkat has friends in high-ranking positions in all of them."

"How did you think of that before I did?" You hiss.

He blinks at you, and whispers "did you honestly forget? Having those kind of political connections are kind of a big thing."

You want to say something, but, well, he's right. So you just grumble to yourself a little and break eye contact.

Suddenly, Tullius looks a little unsure. Ulfric and his general exchange a quick glance.

"Exactly. And, John, you may have worried about this before due to the political implications, but this may be a suitable time to give your full introduction."

He sits up a little straighter, getting where she's going with this. Oh fuck, that's his shit is about to go down look. In the last thirty seconds, he went from desperate and uncertain to completely dominating the room.

…Honestly it's kind of hot.

"My name is Sir John Egbert, of the Battlehorn Egberts" Elisif gasps and Ulfric and his general exchange concerned looks. "Eldest son of Baron Jack Egbert and heir to Battlehorn Castle and the surrounding lands. Master battlemage and knight of Chorrol. Also favorite nephew of Jean Harley, commanding battlemage and head of the School of Spell Swords in the Imperial City."

Well, he's her only nephew, but they don't have to know that.

"And?" Rose asks.

"I already told them about my status as dragonborn."

"I meant that particular piece of classified information you received at the beginning of this month."

"Oh," his eyes go wide. "Rose, I don't like making threats."

"There is a difference between threats and stating facts."

He nibbles on the inside of his cheek for a moment and then nods. "And if this war doesn't end soon, the Emperor wants to send the 413th squadron – us – to go in and end it by any means necessary."

There are concerned murmurs around the table. Even Terezi looks shocked. Any means necessary? You think of his chaos magic, his combat skill, and what a whole team of Johns could do to a city. No, he wouldn't. He can't.

"Are you fucking serious?" You hiss.

He refuses to make eye contact. He speaks softly, in his normal voice. "Yeah. They're already starting negotiations for burning Windhelm to the ground. I mean-” he looks back up at you. "I don't want to! But… we might not have a choice. That's why I want to end this now. Before anyone gets hurt."

You can only gape at him.
"And now you're starting to understand the kind of force you're dealing with here." Rose says, resting her chin on the back of her hand. "Again, this is not a threat; just a fact. But I think perhaps that makes it clear how prudent it would be to not only bring a temporary ceasefire, but an end to this war altogether unless you want to be high king of a pile of ash."

Terezi cackles, "Lalonde, I think I like you."

Tullius takes a deep breath and regains his composure. "Well then, let's get on with things. I'd rather be done with this and be able to go back to fortifying the boarder with the Aldmeri Dominion."

"Wonderful," Ulfric says, the fire in him not extinguished yet. "Then surrender."

"If you were not protected by the treaty, the Aldmeri Dominion would come for you." Tullius says. "They could conquer Skyrim in days."

"I'd like to see those thin-skinned beasts hold these lands," Ulfric says smugly.

"Well, let's just see what the Thalmor themselves think, shall we?" Delphine asks, pulling out a small leather book.

"Oh!" John says, "I remember that!"

Delphine coughs. "Yes, well, this was acquired from the Thalmor embassy. It contains notes on you, Ulfric."

"Well? What does it say?" Tullius demands.

"It notes in here that the Thalmor's goal is to keep this war raging. Either an Imperial or Stormcloak victory would harm their overall position."

"Okay," John says, "Can we agree that none of us really like the Talmor?"

There are murmurs of assent around the table.

"Good. Now if we're going to keep them from taking over all of Tamriel, we have to stick together."

"But now we are already ruled by the elves in all but name," Ulfric replies. "When the people of Skyrim do not even have the freedom to praise the god their families died for, this is no empire of men."

"You're right, it's not," Terezi says. "Skyrim hasn't been a kingdom of men for thousands of years. It's been home to Bretons, Elves, and the beast races since long before the Empire conquered it, not to mention all the other kinds of humans that don't care as much about Talos. You're afraid of being conquered by the Altmer; I get it. Actually, I think I get it more than you do. Because you're afraid that when they take over they're going to treat you the way you've treated us."

"I thought you were meant to be neutral," Ulfric's general says.

She shrugs. "I'm not saying what to do. I'm just verbalizing what he's thinking, like how you're angry because I'm right and you know it."

"Stand down, Galmar," Ulfric says. "So what do you propose?"

"There must be some kind of middle ground here," John says. "So I know this war is over whether
or not Skyrim will stay part of the empire. But maybe if we look at **why** people want it to be one way or the other we can work out some kind of compromise."

"Alright," Terezi says. "Ulfric, you go first. But we've already voided the Skyrim for the Nords thing, so let's skip that bit…"

The conversation that follows is really long and, to be honest, really boring. The first fifteen minutes were so tense you thought you might faint. Because now Karkat knows. He knows that you might have to attack his home, raze it to the ground. You have to try to juggle writing little reassuring notes to him that you will – *are* – doing everything you can to keep it from happening. But soon it becomes obvious that everyone agrees an end to the war would be good, and you're onto tiny arguments about the exact terms. There's a lot of back and forth on details of religion and laws, and teeny-tiny details of White-Gold Concordat and the treaty that first ceded Skyrim to the Empire and blah, blah, blah.

Terezi is in fucking Aetherius during all this. She grins from ear to ear and alternates between leaning forward with excitement and leaning back smugly when she feels she's made a point. But the rest of you are just kind of sitting there retaining various amounts of composure. Once Karkat realized that the talks were going pretty well, he started to calm down. The two of you enjoyed watching Terezi's animated expressions, but it got old after a while. Now the two of you keep passing notes back and forth flirting or playing hangman or drawing unflattering pictures of most of the other people in the room.

A number of them have left. Since it seems as though they've moved on to talking politics instead of the war itself, the legate Tullius brought and Ulfric's general have both stepped out. At that point, Karkat asked if he leave, and everyone agreed that you could but you had to stay. And even given that option, he chose to stay with you. You hope that means you're forgiven.

Delphine looks about as bored as you are, and she and Esbern appear to be passing notes as well, while the *intense and fascinating* political struggle goes back and forth and back and forth. You have no idea where they are in discussion. You never got to sit at a negotiation table when actual important people were discussing actual important things. A few times it seemed like they were reaching an agreement, only for it to devolve into more squabbling. Only Rose has maintained her composure, every now and then tapping Ulfric and Tullius back into being civil. You try to focus and learn – really you do! But you find yourself daydreaming about Whiterun and Karkat and home.

Finally, Terezi stands. "Alright, so to summarize… Oh crap, I hope someone wrote this down."

"I have it here," Rose says. She clears her throat "On this, the twenty-first day of First Seed, year two hundred and two of the fourth era, Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak and General Natces Tullius agree to peace given the following terms: Skyrim will remain part of the Empire. In return, an additional 10% of total local tax revenue will be returned to hold governments for use in community projects such as maintenance of wells, walls, or roads. While Talos worship will remain illegal as specified in the White-Gold Concordat, *political* monuments to Tiber Septim, as founder of the Empire, are completely legal and small signs of his memory can be held by citizens without penalty."

"It should be noted off the books," Terezi says, "That most common forms of Talos worship will be acceptable under these conditions, assuming you rename a few shrines and stuff."

"Thank you," Rose says. "The vast majority of legion troops will leave the province by the thirtieth of Rain's Hand, allowing Skyrim greater autonomy in its military institutions. Only one adviser and platoon per hold will remain to watch for international threats and to aid in clearing the ludicrous
number of bandit groups that have been founded since the war began. By the aforementioned date, the Jarls of Skyrim will convene to legitimately elect the new High King. Ulfric Stormcloak and members of his army are granted clemency from any charges of treason. Finally, Jarl Balgruuf the Greater will endeavor to repair and then allow the use of the dragon trap in Dragonsreach when needed for the good of the people."

"Are there any objections?" Terezi asks.

The room is silent except for the cracking of the fire.

"Okay, great. Now we need Ulfric and Tullius to make their marks on the two lines, once on each side please, and then everyone else wherever on the bottom as witnesses. Then it's official, we can cut this guy in two, and then all go to sleep."

You all pass the piece of parchment around the table, and when it ends up back in Rose's hand she takes a pair of scissors and cuts the treaty, handing one side to Ulfric and the other to Tullius. Terezi bangs her cane on the ground.

"Case dismissed."

Everyone starts shuffling out of the hall. Thank Stendarr. You have no idea what fucking time it is, other than "too damn late." Honestly, you just want to flop into one of those stone beds and call it a night. Tullius comes around to your side of the table and places a large parcel in front of you.

"As promised," he said. "Honestly, this went far better than I could have hoped."

You laugh. "Yeah, I feel the same."

He walks away and you pick up your parcel. It's soft and light in your hands. You begin to open it, just to make sure it's actually what he said it was, but then you're distracted.

"Dragonborn," Delphine says, "Wait a moment. We may have settled this war, but the fact remains that we still need a dragon."

"Can't this wait until tomorrow?" you ask, yawning.

"No," She says.

"Why?" Karkat asks suspiciously.

"We know about Pyralspite."

"What about her?" Terezi asks, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes. Yeah, like she didn't already know what Delphine was about to say.

"We have our duty, child." Esbern says gently. "And while, yes, she did betray Alduin at the last moment, we cannot be sure she won't change sides again."

"Well she won't," Terezi huffs. "You have my word."

"Even if she does not, her past crimes are enough to warrant execution. As you seem so interested in justice, you should likely be--"

"Look," you say, "Can we just go back to talking about this dragon we're gonna catch?"

"No," Delphine says, "We deal with this dragon first."
"After all that, you'd turn your back on the world for this?" Terezi hisses. "I thought you said you were going to help John. This thing with Pyral's not even personal."

"I will not go back on any of my oaths," Delphine says. "But my older one takes priority. If I know of where a dragon hides, it is my duty to slay it."

Terezi growls and pushes her chair back. "Funny, because it's my duty to stop you." She grips the end of her cane and pulls, revealing a long thin blade that had been hidden within it.

"Come on!" you say, getting between them. "We just made it through a peace talk. We are not doing this."

"I fear we may have no choice," Delphine says, drawing her own sword.

"Pyralspite is old and blind and already injured," Terezi says. "She's no threat to you!"

"Come now," Esbern says. "I understand your eagerness, Delphine, but we must not forget ourselves. Let's give John one last bit of advice, for the sake of the world. After that, you need not help him again until Pyralspite falls."

Delphine growls but sheathes her sword. "Fine. Esbern, I am heading to our tent. Tell them what you will. But make note," She glares harshly at Terezi. "If this girl's little pet becomes a whisper of a threat, I will cut through anyone who dares stand between me and her." She storms out.

Terezi frowns and reassembles her cane.

"I understand Delphine can be a bit much sometimes," Esbern says, stroking his beard. "But she really does mean well. Anyway, I do know of one dragon who might be of aid. His name is Odahviing."

"Odahviing?" You repeat. The name feels strange on your tongue.

"Right. He is a powerful dragon, and we believe he has been resurrected to serve at Alduin's right hand."

"So we're gonna go for two on traitorous lieutenants?" Karkat asks. "The odds of that seem pretty slim."

"Odahviing is strong, proud. He commands the other dragons, and that is why you must capture him. He is certain to know of Alduin's hiding place."

"How do I get him?" You ask.

Esbern gives you a wry smile. "As I said, he is proud. Far too proud for his own good. If you call forth your energy, shout his name like a thu'um, he will be unable to resist the challenge."

You nod. "It's worth a try, anyway."

"I agree. If you need more advice, I am still studying the carvings in Sky Haven Temple. I will not help you until Pyralspite is slain, but once that is done simply send word there and I will aid you."

"Thank you," You say.

Terezi glares at you. "You're not going to try, are you?"

"No. I think that's enough for us to manage."
The old man smiles, gets slowly to his feet. "As always, Dragonborn. I wish you luck."

Terezi scowls. "Okay. We ready to go now?"

"Yeah," You say.

You tuck your parcel under your arm and let her lead you out of the hall.

Okay, now, now you're going to go to bed. For real. And nothing is going to stop you. Just as soon as you climb up the rest of the mountain to Terezi's place because all the other beds in the monastery are full.

But, as you round the last part of the path, you see light peeking through the shutters. Of course.

You summon your hammer, but she puts a gentle hand on your arm. "Don’t worry. Look."

She points forward. Pyralspite is curled at the base of the stone monolith like a massive cat. She lifts her head slightly, acknowledging your presence and then lowers it again, tucking her nose beneath her slightly tattered wing.

"If Pyral isn't worried, I'm not," she says. She marches up to her cottage and throws the door open.

Rose sits beside the fire, her finery looking completely out of place against the simple wicker chair and dirt hearth. She holds a red bottle in one hand and a piece of parchment in the other. Dave's crow flutters across the counter, looking for scraps.

"Ah, I was wondering when you'd be coming along," she says, not looking up from the parchment.

"Aren't you like psychic or something?" Karkat scoffs.

"I don't like to waste my energy on such trifling things when I can do simple math to realize that there are fewer beds in High Hrothgar than the number of people at that meeting. Although it still escapes me why, then, their table had that many chairs."

"Thanks for that save, by the way," you say. "You were great!"

"It's a little less impressive when you realize she had rehearsed that speech in her head over and over again as she came in," Terezi says, leaning against the wall.

Rose smiles and raises the bottle. "Well, it paid off."

"Is no one going to ask what she's doing here?" Karkat demands. "No one else is going to ask what she's doing here. So I guess I, as the only reasonable one here, have to-"

"So what are you doing here anyway?" you ask, cutting him off to make things faster, and maybe a little bit to make him sputter adorably.

"I came to sell you two on a vacation."

"You're kidding." Karkat says. "Come on, I know you're kidding."

"Well, yes and no." She reaches down, placing her bottle on the floor. "John, Karkat, we need the two of you in Solstheim."
Chapter 22

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

Chapter Notes

yay exposition i guess???

We get to more fun stuff next time, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As you understand it, usually after a war ends there’s celebrating and stuff. People are supposed to get together and be excited because the soldiers are coming home and life is going back to normal and fewer people will be dying far away from home. As you ride through the night it seems like that’s accurate. All the settlements you pass have bonfires burning and you can hear the music and smell the food. Too bad you don’t get to stop and enjoy yourselves.

Rose leads you forward at an unforgiving pace. Her white horse shines in the moonlight, but you can barely see the terrain under Shadowmere’s hooves. Luckily he seems to be able to, and you don’t stumble. Yay demon horses!

Karkat’s leaning against you. You’re not sure whether or not he’s drifting off. As the night goes on and on you’re finding it harder to stay awake too. Rose might have told you to rest through the day, but it’s not like you can just will yourself to sleep!

You urge Shadowmere a little bit further forward so you’re next to Rose.

“Is there something you need, John?” she asks.

“Yeah. Can you talk to us? Like, keep our brains active so we don’t fall asleep?”

Karkat contributes a sleepy “Mmm-hmm.”

“I suppose. What would you like to talk about?: She asks.

“Well, you were kind of vague in what you wanted us to do.”

“Ah, of course. When we arrived in Solthseim it was clear that something strange was afoot. Many of the locals walk as though they were in a dream. Each day and night they work to repair these stone pillars. They all chant in old Draconian of all things.”

“Do you know what they’re saying?”

She sighs. “Not exactly. The language is certainly related to old Nordic, but it had diverged heavily by our time, and they speak infuriatingly quietly to begin with. Something about work and memory.”

“Does the Eye of Magnus have anything to do with it?”

“It’s possible,” she says, "The monuments exude a similar eerie glow. However, none of the people
with their wits about them claim to have seen it. We know it must be somewhere on the island, as we were able to trace the Eye’s magical signature to it, but we have not found it.”

“So do we have any leads?” Karkat asks, yawning.

“My Dunmeri is awfully rusty, but I was able to talk my way into doing some research at the temple archives. The oldest reports are still written in Aldmeri, and they even had a few tablets in ancient Nordic, so we were able to understand those. It appears these monuments are shrines to the elements, and they have served as a source of magical energy since time immemorial.”

“Okay,” you say, “How does that help you?”

“The legends say they glowed once before in the time of the dragons. As they neared the time of the dragon wars, one priest went rogue. His name was Miraak, and he was the first known dragonborn. He turned on his former masters, growing a dragon army of his own. He meant to ascend to Godhood. Then one day he vanished without a trace.”

“So do you think he was banished through time? Like Alduin was?” You ask.

“I doubt it. Dave detects no significant echoes of time magic on the island. There’s something more complex going on. What it is, though, I have no idea. What I do know is that on some of the oldest maps have a place called the Temple of Miraak. If there’s a clue, it must be there.”

“So you searched it, right?” Karkat asks.

“As well as we could.” She frowns. “We went through most of the ruins, found it polluted with more of those cultists. They’re certainly using it as a base. But then we hit a dead end. There’s a complex locking mechanism and a draconian word wall. If the temple was made for Miraak, I would not be surprised if a shout was necessary to enter the inner sanctum.”

“And that’s why you need us,” you say.

“Exactly. But also I feel there is something poetic about this, having the last dragonborn face the first.”

Karkat scowls. “Who cares if it’s poetic? We just need to get in, find the eye, and get out.”

“Ideally. But if I know old Nordic magic – and I do – the elegance may in fact be necessary.”

“Great,” he says.

“I know, I know. But on the bright side, we’re almost done for the night.”

You round a corner and the forest ends abruptly. You’re left looking out over the docks of Windhelm.

“Hmm… I do hope an innkeeper will be up at this hour.”

“We don’t need an innkeeper,” Karkat says. “I have the key to my dad’s house. He’ll be fine with us crashing there for the day.”

“Are you certain?”

He gives her a pointed look, and then urges Shadowmere forward even faster. You laugh and put your head on his shoulder. Well, that’s probably a yes.
Karkat is, in fact, right, and you spend the day sleeping at his father's house. You go to the docks shortly after sunset, and it takes the better part of the next night for the small vessel you've hired to reach Solstheim. Raven Rock is smaller than you expected. Its buildings remind you of a colony of beetles clinging to the rocks. They've built a massive wall to the northeast, shielding the colony from whatever's on the rest of the island. Oh, wow, what could be out there?

You're practically shaking as the boat docks. You want to go out, you need to start this adventure, but you know that you won't be able to do much else tonight. The eastern sky is already starting to glow vaguely pink, and you need to get Rose inside soon.

Well, you could always go off without her… After all, you did fall asleep on the boat for a while. You've got some energy.

You leap off the boat as soon as it's tied up. Karkat rolls his eyes but follows you. Rose steps off daintily after paying the boatman.

"So!" You say, rubbing your hands together, "Where do you guys wanna go first?"

"Well, I, for one, am heading over there," Rose says. She points to a small stone building on the edge of town. "We rent that space on a weekly basis. There is plenty of room for you to sleep as well. But if you'd rather explore-"

You grab Karkat's wrist and drag him forward into town. This is gonna be so much fun!

"Hey, have you ever been out here before?" You ask him.

"Hell no," he says, a surprising amount of venom in his voice.

"Huh?" You stop, still holding his hand. He's glaring. "Karkat, what's wrong?"

"What? Nothing's wrong! What could possibly be wrong? It's not like this island is completely populated by xenophobic assholes!"

"Should you really be saying-"

"Yeah. They're proud of it. So proud of it a lot of them probably don't even speak Cyrodillic. I'm shocked that their flag isn't a big banner saying 'we fucking hate outlanders and yes this includes you,' and I'm additionally dumbfounded that they didn't then take that design and use it to make all of their clothes and sleep with it at night and then fondle themselves through it while-"

"-So being another Dunmer doesn't help," you say.

"Right. Actually, it might make it worse. Remember, this is House Redoran territory."

"Is that a problem?"

"It is for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Okay, so as usual there's the whole mixed thing, which is losing points to start with." He looks both ways and then pulls you down closer to him, lowering his voice. "But that's getting more common these days anyway. My real problem is that the Vantas family… isn’t exactly welcome in Redoran land."

“How come?” you whisper back.
“So my dad used to be an Imperial spy in Morrowind keeping an eye on Vvardenfell. Then he fell in love with the Arch-master’s daughter and the two of them ran off to Windhelm so they could get married.”

"Okay, so?"

"So Redoran considered that a huge dishonor and banished the two of them and all of their descendants forever, and it’s kind of illegal for me to be here.”

"Well shit," you say flatly.

"Just don't use my last name and it'll be fine."

"Okay, but what if-"

"Halt." A guard dressed in gleaming white armor approaches you. "State your names and business in Raven Rock."

Great.

"John Egbert," you say, "We're here to help stop Miraak."

The guard pulls a small book from a pouch at her hip and scribbles something down. "Oh good, it's about time those reinforcements got here. Bloody empire took their sweet time. And you?" she asks, turning vaguely towards Karkat.

"Oh? Uh, Karkat Leijon."

Huh. You wonder why he went for her?

"Wonderful! Sure you don't want to stay? We could always use some more warriors who stand with Redoran. Ah, well, run along. Good luck!"

"Nepeta?" You ask him as you hustle past the guard. "Really?"

"Look, she and Zahhak are the only two I knew were Redoran, and I'm not sweaty enough to be the second one."

"Well, you don't make enough puns to be the first."

"Every family has a black sheep. It'll be fine. Now let's find our way around."

You look around the town, but then you see a flash out of the corner of your eye. You turn back to the water to see an unearthly pillar of green light faint against the western sky on the other side of the harbor. "Hang on, what's that?"

"That's a fucking good question."

You hustle through town, carefully maneuvering through the crowds of elves. The pillar of light is growing fainter as the sky lightens, but you keep an eye on it, working your way around the harbor.

First the crowds begin to thin, then the buildings do. Finally you're out into a gray, desolate wasteland with nothing but strange red bushes popping up now and again on your right and the sea on your left. But then you get to the top of a hill and see the source of the light: a massive stone pillar.
A number of people mill about at the base. As you get closer, you begin to see them working away at the monument with chisels and hammers. They murmur things under their breath, but it's too quiet for you to understand. This must be what Rose was talking about.

"What the fuck is going on?" Karkat mutters.

"It certainly is [something], isn't it?" A dark elf sits not too far away. He addresses you in Dunmeri. Fuck. "They've been at this for days. They don't eat or sleep; just work and [something]."

"Have you tried to stop them?" You demand.

"Okay, human," The elf turns to look at you. "First of all, never try to speak our language again. I'm surprised the Tribunal didn't strike you down from here. Anyway, why would I want to stop them? This is truly fascinating."

"It can't be good for them. I've got to try to-"

The dunmer scoffs. "You're just the same as those Bretons. But they couldn't distract those workers and neither will you."

"We'll see about that."

But as you approach the stone your mind begins to go fuzzy. What-? What are you doing? The pillar calls to you. If you just go touch it, you'll be able to-

Everything goes black, and you hear a smooth voice whisper in your ear.

*Here in my shrine, that they have forgotten. Here do you toil, that you might remember..."

Next thing you know, you feel yourself being pulled backwards. Wow, it's a lot brighter out than it was a second ago. Someone has a firm hold on your shoulders and is tugging you away from the monument.

"What?" You say, blearily.

Whoever is holding you freezes and then you're on the ground, staring up. The sun is in your eyes. Wait... wasn't it just morning? What is- You realize that you're holding a chisel in one hand and a small hammer in the other. You let out a shout of surprise and toss the offending tools away.

"John? Are you back?" Karkat asks. He kneels over you, touching your face like he's afraid you'll dissipate on contact.

"Yeah," you sit up. "What- what happened?"

"Oh thank Azura," He embraces you tightly. "You went into some kind of trance and started working like everyone else. You were like that for six fucking hours."

You look back at the column, remembering the voice's call. It pulled you in. It shouldn't be able to pull you in. You're supposed to be resistant to this shit. What is going on? "How-?" you breathe.

Karkat rolls his eyes. "Ugh, at least this is lucid John confusion as opposed to brainwashed John confusion." He lets you go. "I tried everything I could think of, talking to you, shaking you, bringing you food-"

"Oh yeah, I'm kind of hungry. Can we-"
"Yeah sure, let's just ignore the fact that you were a goddamn zombie all morning!" He tugs at his hair. "Gods I- I couldn't do anything but sit and wait and hope. You wouldn't fucking budge and that other asshole wouldn't help, so it's a damn miracle that the apothecary had the stuff to make a strength potion in stock." He stands with a sigh. "Look, let's go back to town. There's nothing we can do for these people. Not like this."

Well, he's right. You nod and let him help you to your feet.

You feel like death as you stumble back into the abandoned building. True to her word, Rose has several bedrolls spread out on the packed earth floor. She's curled up in one of them, deeply asleep. She doesn't even stir as you enter.

But to be honest, you don't really care. All you do is flop down on one of the abandoned ones. You fall asleep without even getting properly inside.

---

After a while, your mind breaks back into consciousness. Everything is pleasantly warm, and someone's plopped a blanket or a bedroll or at least something nice and furry down on top of you. A fire crackles and the air smells like smoke and roasted snowberries. Karkat and Rose are talking with low voices. It's all nice and peaceful and you want to lay there forever.

Then you realize you're starving. With a groan, you push yourself up and rub the sleep from your eyes.

"Oh good, you're up. Tell Rose she's wrong and that the best version of The Armorer's Challenge is the one where Hazadir and Saccus get married and successfully outfit the army in a week."

Before you can even respond, Rose says. "Good evening, John. Sleep well? Also, tell Karkat that while perhaps it is a better story, it is untrue, and Hazadir cheated in the battle and had Saccus killed to obtain his shop."

"Really?" Karkat snarls. "Did you just go and sit in on all that? I thought you would have been doing something more important elsewhere with your valuable vampire queen time."

"Don't be ridiculous, Roxy lives in Elsweyr."

"Who cares?" you groan, scooting closer to the fire. There's a pair of steaks on the bottom of a pot, sizzling away with chunks of something that looks like weird red potato. "What time is it?"

"It should be almost sunset," Karkat says, flipping the meat.

"Honestly, if you didn't wake up we'd be rousing you soon. It's a bit of a hike, and we should all eat before we set off."

"I knew it!" Karkat exclaims, hopping to his feet. "I knew this was a trap! A ridiculous, nonsensical, convoluted trap! She's cornered us alone on this desolate island so that she can pull our sweet, pure blood from our unsuspecting vulnerable arteries!"

"What." Rose says.

"But you're too fucking late! We've figured you out and now we're both awake. Now the only thing you'll be able to suck is our fucking dicks as we plow you into the fucking ground! You-"

"I've spent long enough with Dave to sense that this is going to be some obtuse sexual metaphor, but a: I am completely uninterested, b: if I cared as much about romance as I did about the fate of
"the universe I would be at home with my wife, and c: there are other ways." She reaches into her bag and pulls out a large red bottle.

"What is that?" he asks.

"This," she replies, "is a blood potion. They're rather rare and difficult to make, but almost as good as real human blood with a lot fewer ethical dilemmas." She takes a long swig.

"Huh," You say.

"Uh." Karkat plops back onto the ground. "Uh, sorry. I guess."

"Apology accepted. Now if my olfactory memory is intact, I think that horker might be about to burn."

Karkat fumbles for his tongs, which got flung somewhere during his outburst. You just grab the pot's handle with a rag and set it on the stone floor. Karkat gives you a look and then spears a piece of the red stuff with his knife.

"Hehe, you're so cute when you're flustered," You say, smiling at him.

"I could stab you next," he growls.

You laugh again and start to eat. Rose just stares at you like you are the strangest thing on Nirn. Well, objectively, maybe you are. You try one of the weird red vegetables, and it feels a bit like eating wet sand. You barely manage to not spit it out.

"What the hell is this?"

"Ash yam," Karkat says. "They're the closest thing to potatoes you can grow here.

"Why do they do this, though?" You crush a little piece between your fingers and it turns to dust.

He shrugs. "Look, all I know is they grow really well in ash and we didn't have that much space for provisions." He looks down at the pot sadly. "I guess there's just a reason that most Dunmer food is traditionally like a porridge kind of thing."

"Hmm… I thought there was something like that," Rose says with a frown.

"Then why didn't you say anything when I cut them up?!"

Rose chuckles, "Of course, Karkat. It would be reasonable to assume that I, a nord who has not consumed actual food in thousands of years, would know more about traditional Dunmeri cuisine than you, an actual Dunmer with a father who grew up in Morrowind."

"Heh, she does have a point," you say.

"You can't grow ashcrops in normal soil," he grumbles before tearing into his meat. And ooh, watching him eat with that kind of ferocity is-

Rose notices you staring and smirks. You blush up to your hairline and turn down to look at your sand-potatoes. Rose just leans back and sips her potion.

The light peeking in from under the door dims and then vanishes. Karkat is still sulking and you're still embarrassed, so for the most part it's quiet.
"We should go soon," Rose says.

You smile and sit a little more upright. "Yeah! Let's do it!"

"You finally going to tell us what’s making you bounce like a seven year old who had a skooma-spiked sweetroll?" Karkat asks. "You haven't been this excited for a fight in months."

"Heh, that's because… now I have… THIS!" you pull your armor from your bag.

Karkat blinks blankly at you and Rose just raises one eyebrow.

"Look, I know red isn't really my color, but come on!"

"I know you were excited to get your shirt back, but it's still just a damn shirt." Karkat says.

You frown. It is absolutely manly and totally not a pout. “It is so not just a shirt.”

“What is it, then, like mithril or something?” He reaches out to touch the soft, silky material.

“No,” Rose says. “Mithril was still metallic, and also it was nowhere near as good as modern ebony is.”

“Well I was gonna tell you,” you say pulling it on. “But now you just have to wait because you were being a dick about it.”

Karkat rolls his eyes and starts pulling his armor out of his bag. “Well, if it’s more stupid daedra magic, I guess it hasn’t fucked us over too badly yet.”

“It’s not stupid…” you murmur.

Rose still looks uncertain, but she’ll see. And Karkat will see too and when he does his face will be priceless. You let that console you.

Once everyone's ready you head north towards the temple. It's a bit of a hike, but you don’t think it took more than a few hours. Ugh, it’s a good thing you had that nap this afternoon. As it is you're practically dead on your feet, so you keep tripping over stumps and other things buried in the ash.

But then you actually get there, and no one could sleep through that. Dozens of dragon skeletons litter the steps of the temple, many of them sun-bleached and cracked with age. When you reach the top, there's a massive crater with more stone pillars inside. The entire structure is covered in bizarre black filigrees. Just like at the Earth Stone, there are a dozen people working away at the monument, voices droning on without feeling. But these are Nords, not Dunmer. You didn’t know any of them lived on the island.

You pause.

"What's wrong?" Rose asks.

"I- I don't know if it's a good idea for me to go through there."

"You'll be fine," she says flippantly, "If you start getting hypnotized Karkat and I can pull you away."

She starts walking down the hill, approaching the monument. You take a deep breath, build the strongest mental fortifications you can, and hesitantly follow. One Nord woman turns and looks, her eyes clear. She rushes up to greet you.
"You have returned," She says. Her accent is thick and not quite like that of any other Nords you've met.

"As promised," Rose replies. "These are my friends, John and Karkat. John, Karkat, This is Frea of the Skaal."

"Um, hi," you say.

"It is nice to meet the friends Rose says might be able to free my people."

"You told her we would what?!" Karkat demands.

"Might," Rose stresses. "I told her when I left I was going to get you so you could open the final chamber."

"And you think that'll help these guys?" You ask.

"I think it's our best lead at the moment. Frea, are my siblings still below?"

"I am unsure. Most nights I return to the village, but I have not seen them leave."

"Alright, thank you," Rose says. "They should have kept the dungeon fairly clear, if they're still inside. Just keep an eye out. It would be most unfortunate if John were to trip and tear that nice tunic."

Karkat snickers. Fuck, you love him but he’s such an asshole sometimes."

"I shall accompany you," Frea says firmly.

"As I have said before," Rose replies. "There is no need for that."

"No need? A strange elf appears outside my village with a glowing orb, most of my people follow him here and begin working on this… thing and have not returned home for a week. I believe there is need for me to be involved!"

Rose frowns.

"I understand that you and your friends are strong, but so am I. And I did not return to this cursed place to watch. I have come to save my kin or avenge them."

"I mean," you say, "Couldn't hurt to have another pair of hands. And she looks like she's ready to fight."

"Indeed," Frea says, smiling with approval. "John, was it?"

You nod.

"He speaks the truth. Now let us go."

She takes a torch and leads you down the spiral stairs. You can hear the edges of the whispers again, but this time you're ready. You block them out with little effort and smile.

To be honest, you don't think that much of the ruins. Yeah, they're bigger than normal, but otherwise pretty standard. Karkat is a little hunkered down and on edge, but Rose seems completely calm and content.
Then it opens up wider and things start to head a bit more towards the macabre. Cages covered in ancient bloodstains hang above a fiery pit. Bones are impaled on all of the bars. Like, usually the dried up bodies of ancient Nords are bad enough, but this is unusual. Frea looks really shaken.

"You can go back, you know," you say. "It's alright."

But that seems to make her resolve harden even further. She marches ahead and throws the double doors on the far side of the chamber open. Continuing boldly forward, she fails to notice the pressure plate. You manage to yank her back before a swinging axe descends and cuts across right where her head had been.

"I- Thank you." She says.

"No problem," you point down to the ground, "Just watch out for those symbols, okay?"

Rose groans at the hallway. "Great. Usually this kind of thing is a Strider problem."

You look ahead. Yeah, this room is like two or three times longer than your normal swinging axe trap and they're moving faster than usual. It would be difficult if not impossible for you to get through this on your own.

"You think they'd realize we were here?" You ask.

"Eventually, sure, but it would likely take days. And they set up camp too many rooms away to hear us if we shouted."

"What if we just-"

But before you finish your statement, Karkat rushes forward. He dodges one axe, then another, and another. Soon he's at the far end of the chamber and pulls the lever to stop the axes.

"Well, I guess that works too," You say.

"That was quite impressive! Frea says. "I rarely see the elves succeed in such feats of agility."

Karkat puffs up a little bit. "That's because you can bet your ass there aren't any elves like me over in Raven Rock."

"Why would I bet my rear? Would anyone even want it? If I won would I get someone else's behind?"

"It's an expression," you say, a little put out that you still haven't gotten to use your armor yet. This was supposed to be your chance to impress him, dammit.

The next room is big and empty. You're just waiting for the other shoe to drop. There has to be something… Soon you reach the sanctum, and again there's only bodies. Most of them are ancient, but a few are fresher. They wear those same cultist robes as those guys that attacked you all those months ago. Each of them has a set of puncture marks on their throats. The vampires have clearly been through here. You don't even have any big traps to deal with after the first one. Frea seems to learn fast at least.

Then finally, you reach the chamber Rose described. You can hear the ancient chanting in the back of your head, but you ignore it for now. A dragon skeleton hangs from the ceiling. Frea stares at it, mouth agape. She's so enthralled with it she doesn't even notice the three figures sitting just a bit further inside.
Roxy is the first to get up. She rushes over and embraces Rose, and then the two of you.

"Oh shoot, is that still weird? Aw well. I've been stuck in here with Dave and Dirk and they piss themselves at sisterly shoulder touches."

Dirk runs a hand through his hair, but Dave petulantly says, "Oh, we do not!"

"Learn anything interesting while I was gone?" Rose asks, ignoring both of them.

Roxy tucks some loose strands of hair behind her ear. "Not really. Same stuff about serving the dragons, and then turning to serve 'the greater beast of oblivion.' The best we can figure from the pictures and architecture outside, that's probably Hermaeus Mora. Or at least that's what the people who built the temple thought. I mean, nothing to really disprove your theory, sis, but nothing to support it neither."

Rose nods. "Thank you all for staying here as long as you did."

"Yeah, no problem," Dirk says. "Thanks for showing up when you did though. We finished off the last of the cultists like, uh…"

"Almost two days ago," Dave supplies. "But basically it's good we're done at this point, or things might have gotten dangerous."

Rose frowns, "Well, let's be glad it didn't come to that. Now, John, if you'd please."

"Oh thank Meridia, that was getting so annoying." You step towards the wall, holding out your hand. Your vision blurs, a word appears in your mind, and then there are several loud crashing sounds followed by a growl.

Several powerful draugr burst out of the wall and close in on the group, but the vampires don't seem particularly worried.

"Come on, Egbert," Dave says, "Let's see you turn these guys the rest of the way into dust."

You nod and leap forward, summoning your weapon and activating your armor. By the time you land, Vrillyhoo has made a connection with the biggest one's skull, and you're cloaked in the best plate armor a god can muster.

"What the hell is that?!" Karkat demands.

"Now that's the reaction I was hoping for!" You pull your hammer from the first draugr's skull and crush another's ribcage. Or you would have, if the second one didn't turn into a toad on impact.

Well, that's a new one.

"Well what the hell do you know," Dave says, "Something actually fucking fresh enough your average fly will bother landing on it. How often ya see that?"

"Not nearly enough these days," Dirk replies.

Karkat keeps staring, jaw open wide, but that seems like enough for the Striders. They draw their swords and the rest of the draugr are gone before you can even blink. So now it's time to relish in being a badass.

You dismiss your helmet and lean forward on Vrillyhoo. "What do you think of my shirt now?"
Karkat sputters out a few unintelligible things. What finally comes out is, "Okay, but why are there so many faces on it?"

"Humph. Man, can't you just give my stuff the cool credit it deserves."

"Oh, of course, my lord! Let me just prostrate myself before you--" Another draugr pops out and Karkat shoves a sickle in its eye. "...for clearly you are the absolute pinnacle of coolness. Who else could maintain such poise as he trips over his own feet chasing goddamn bunnies all over the place?"

"Fuck if I know," Dave says. "Clearly he has something to teach all of us about proper, non-nerdy conduct. How could we have missed it with the resting dork face and new red turtleneck?"

Okay, Karkat is the absolute worst. Dave is the second worst. You turn on your heel and head deeper into the dungeon.

Ugh, your brothers are at it again. They're having their unspoken competition of "who can kill more draugr while looking completely uninterested." Which means that it is your duty as a loving sister to steal their kills whenever possible.

And they can't do a damn thing about it, lest they reveal their hands to John and Karkat. This is nice; they've stopped caring when it's just the four of you. It's almost enough to distract you from the increasing number of terrifying dragon images. Almost.

But what's bothering you isn't even the number. These dragons are like nothing you've ever seen before, heads rounded and snouts squished. And then there are more of those black filigree patterns. At the same time, there's a profound feeling of wrongness that becomes stronger with each step you take. Then John turns a corner and stops.

"Huh?" he says, "What's this?"

Dave lets out a low whistle, "If I had to guess, I'd say Rose's department."

"What?" You ask, stepping forward into the small chamber.

"Big black book of doom with an octopus on the front. Okay, do your thing and tell us what it is."

"Um..." you say, approaching it, "To be perfectly honest with you, I haven't ever come across a book like this." You lift your hand and reach toward the cover.

Green. Black. Boneless appendages and one massive green eye.

Of course.

"Hermaeus Mora," You whisper as the vision fades.

"Wow, you hit your own personal jackpot, didn't ya?" Roxy says, grinning at you.

"Who is that?" Asks Frea.

"He's the Daedric Prince of knowledge and memory," you say.

"Rose had a tiny shrine to him under a loose floorboard when she was little," Roxy adds. "She made it out of pieces of ruined books and scraps of paper! It was so cute!"
"I'm not entirely sure that's relevant," you reply, giving her a scathing look. "But this is one of his Black Books. If the stories are true, this is the one way for the living to access his realm. But what is it doing here?"

"No idea but you're about to find out?" Dirk asks.

You smile. "I guess you know me too well." You open the book and the text glows before your eyes until the strange green light is all you see

When it fades, you see stacks and stacks of books suspended carefully above foul green water. You lie on a floor made of some sort of membrane. It quivers, cool and wet against your skin.

"Well now, isn't this a surprise?"

You know that voice. You try to push yourself up.

"I'm being facetious, of course. My omniscience hasn't dulled in this reality. Anyway, I'd stay down if I were you, Miss Lalonde," Scratch says.

"You? What are you doing here?" You growl out.

He stands above you, still dressed in black but no longer in the robes of the Thalmor. These are different, older and with different patterns embroidered into velvet. He wears a golden mask that completely obscures his face.

"Oh, come now, Rose. You didn't think that I would appear in this universe as a mere footnote in history. No, compared to me, you, ancient and powerful as you may be, are nothing. Yes, you become a god in the old world, with my help of course, but here? Here, you are a child who got lucky, and I am the first and most powerful of all dragonborn. Soon the monuments throughout the island will be complete, and then I will no longer be a simple projection in Tamriel. I will appear with all of my powers, all of my skill, and I will help my true master usher in the end of the world. You will do nothing to stop it."

"You underestimate us," you growl.

"I sincerely doubt it, which, of course, means this shall never come to pass. This is your first and only trip to Apocrypha, Rose. Next time, you will have the sense to send John. After all, who better to fight the first dragonborn than the last?"

"You just want to kill him, don't you?"

"Hmm? No. It would certainly be a bonus if my true master would not have to contend with all of you. But no. As I'm sure you remember, I simply state facts. Perhaps I occasionally omit a detail, but I do not deceive. Now, return to your mortal realm. You have work to do. After that, go home, child. Hold your wife and wait for the end."

"So, uh, is this normal for her?" You ask. "I mean, it doesn't look like she's even breathing."

Rose stands frozen, staring at the book with eyes wide and mouth agape.

"I mean, strictly speaking we don't have to," Dave says, "Unless we want to talk, which means normally it's more necessary than a coat in Evening Star. Anyway, yeah no this is weird."

Karkat rolls his eyes at him.
A moment later Rose inhales sharply. Her eyes go back into focus and she shuts the book.

"All you dreamed and more?" Roxy asks.

"No, I... this is bad. Really bad." Her face is paler than usual when she turns to look at you.

"So just roll over and pray we get f*cked fast and as painlessly as possible," Karkat huffs.

"Have you any new ideas?" Frea asks.

"I- I met Miraak. It's Scratch."

"Wait, what?!" you demand.

"Well, at least that means we're only trying to hunt one asshole down instead of two," Dirk says.

“How does that change what we have to do?” Karkat asks.

“I don’t know. But I was right. This magic is old and complex and—“

"If you are looking for new magics with which to defeat Miraak," Frea says, "You should come to my village."

"Alright. Dave? What time is it?" Rose asks.

"It's nearly dawn."

"Shit." She plops down on the ground. "We won't make it tonight."

Frea nods. "I understand. But what if instead John and Karkat accompany me and you meet up when you are able? I imagine you'll be more comfortable there than in this ruin."

Rose nods. "Alright. But first, Karkat, I may need to take you up on that drink…"

MIDDAS 25TH FIRST SEED, 4E202

SO WE MADE IT THROUGH THE TEMPLE, IT WASN'T ACTUALLY TOO BAD. THERE WERE ONLY A COUPLE OF MINOR FIGHTS, AND NO ONE GOT HURT. WELL, ROSE STARED INTO OBLIVION AND OBLIVION STARED BACK BUT SHE'S ALRIGHT. AND ONE OF MY SOCKS DECIDED IT HATED ME AND SLIPPED DOWN INTO THE FOOT OF BY BOOT AND KEPT SITTING THERE ALL NIGHT, FLOPPY AND USELESS AS A LIMP DICK, BUT I COULD DO JACK SHIT WITH A SIDE OF FUCK ALL BECAUSE I WOULD HAVE HAD TO DISASSEMBLE MOST OF MY LEG ARMOR. IT'S FUCKING ANNOYING.

OH, SOMETHING ELSE THAT'S ANNOYING: TRAVELING WITH VAMPIRES. BECAUSE FIRST THEY TAKE YOUR SLEEP SCHEDULE AND THROW IT OUT THE WINDOW OF A TEN-STORY TOWER INTO A MOAT FULL OF SHIT AND CROCODILES SO YOU'RE NEVER GETTING IT BACK AND THEY MAKE YOU WANDER AROUND IN THE DARK AND THEN THEY FORGET THAT WE NEED LITTLE THINGS LIKE FOOD. AND WATER. AND TO OCCASIONALLY PAUSE TO TAKE A PISS. ROSE WAS ACTING LIKE WE WERE BEING HUGELY INCONVENIENT TO HER WHEN SHE WAS THE ONE WHO DRAGGED OUR ASSES ALONG TO THIS GODSFORSAKEN ISLAND.

AT LEAST FREA GOT IT. NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE SO HAPPY TO BE TRAVELLING WITH SOME RANDOM NORD. AFTER WE GOT OUT OF THE TEMPLE, WE WALKED
FOR LIKE AN HOUR TO MAKE IT TO HER VILLAGE AND IT WAS FULL MORNING BY
THE TIME WE GOT THERE. ACTUALLY HEARD IT BEFORE WE SAW IT. THE PEOPLE
LEFT IN THE VILLAGE WERE ALL SINGING THIS SONG THAT MADE MY FUCKING
BONES RATTLE. WHEN WE FINALLY GOT A CLEAR VIEW, THE ENTIRE VILLAGE
WAS UNDER THIS SPHERE OF WHITE LIGHT. IT TOOK JOHN A COUPLE TIMES TO
GET IN, ACTUALLY. APPARENTLY THE SONG IS ANTI-DAEDRA MAGIC OR
SOMETHING. WEIRD, BUT KIND OF COOL.

AND THEN FREA SPENT LIKE FIVE MINUTES TALKING TO HER DAD, WHO SEEMS TO
BE MORE OR LESS IN CHARGE, AND HE GAVE US ANOTHER FETCH QUEST.
ACTUALLY, TO BE FAIR, IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE WE'VE HAD ONE OF THOSE. BUT
ANYWAY THERE'S SOME MOUNTAIN IN THE NORTH WE'RE SUPPOSED TO CLIMB TO
GET A WORD OF POWER WHICH IS SUPPOSED TO HELP US STOP MIRAANK. OR
SCRATCH. OR WHATEVER WE'RE SUPPOSED TO CALL HIM. WHY DOES EVERYONE
WE FIGHT HAVE TO HAVE MORE THAN ONE NAME?

…MAYBE JOHN HAS A POINT ABOUT DUNMERI TITLES BEING WEIRD. BUT AT
LEAST FOR THAT THERE ARE *RULES.*

ANYWAY, WHEN FREA SAID THAT A LOT OF HER VILLAGE WAS BEING PULLED
AWAY TO THE PILLARS SHE WASN’T KIDDING. MOST OF THE HOUSES ARE EMPTY.
THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT THAT MEANS EVERYONE WHO WAS LEFT WAS COOL
WITH US SETTING UP SHOP IN ONE OF THEM. WHICH MEANS REAL BEDS! I
HAVEN’T LAID DOWN YET BECAUSE I’M PRETTY SURE AS SOON AS I DO I’LL PASS
OUT.

I THINK THIS IS GOOD ENOUGH FOR NOW. I’M GOING TO SLEEP.

turdas, 26th first seed 4e201

made it to saering’s watch today. pretty standard big old wall on top of a mountain. there was a
dragon and some draugr guarding it, but the good news is that they were already fighting each
other when we got there. so we kept our distance and mostly focused on keeping the dragon down,
ocasionally hitting it with fire balls or arrows. it managed to wipe out the draugr right before we
killed it, so the real fight was actually pretty easy.

then scratch appeared, or at least a projection of him did. he was kind of sparkly and see-through,
which was cool, but he took the dragon’s soul before i could, which was a lot less cool. and if he
could do that then, he can probably do it again, which means every dragon i kill while i’m here just
makes him stronger! this sucks. guess we’ll just have to move fast.

the shout i got from the word wall seems to be about manipulating things. it’s not like the other
words, and i don’t like the way it feels even to think about. i haven’t tried it out yet, and i’m not
entirely sure what i’m even supposed to do with it so we just came right back to the village.

dave, rose, dirk and roxy were there by the time we got back. they claimed a house without
windows for themselves. they think the best way forward is for rose and dave to team up with time
and seer powers to figure out what we have to do, but apparently the time isn't right or something.
they’re going to do it tomorrow night.

apparently they and the shaman agree i’m supposed to use this new shout on the wind stone.
maybe like me manipulating the stone will cancel out the stone manipulating the people? i don’t
know.
heh, karkat is being adorably grumpy at inanimate objects. usually that means deep down he wants cuddles. i should go take care of that.

That evening when you wake up, you have an epiphany. A minor one, but it still counts. Jane has mentioned in a few letters she has a girlfriend named Roxy. Roxy is not a particularly common name. Roxy Lalonde *normally* lives in the south, but this morning she mentioned spending a lot of time in Hammerfell recently. Where Jane has been adventuring. She also totally matches the descriptions that Jane put in her letters.

Fuck, you’re an idiot.

Karkat opens one eye and grumbles a bit when you try to get up. You soothe him, running your fingers through his hair.

“Shh. It’s okay, baby. I’ll be right back.”

He mutters something that sounds suspiciously like “stupid Egbert,” But closes his eyes and rolls over to claim more of the warm spot. He doesn’t need to be involved in this. It’s not like it’s a big deal. You just want to make sure.

You throw some clothes on and head across the square to the house where the vampires are staying. You knock on the door, and Rose answers a few moments later. She’s got her normal dress on, but is still rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“John? What are you doing here this early?”

“Uh, hi. I just wanted to check on something.”

She furrows her brow. “Alright, I suppose. Come in.” She steps to the side and lets you enter.

It seems like they’re in the middle of getting ready, most of them in various stages of dressed. Everyone is mostly covered, though Roxy and Dirk are missing their tunics and Dave only has one bracer on.

“So,” you say to Roxy, “You’re dating my cousin, aren’t you?”

There’s a tense moment of silence and the three of them freeze. Roxy looks up at you with wide eyes and Dave then sets down his other bracer.

Roxy clicks her tongue. “Oh *duh*! Of course Janey is your cousin in this universe! That makes so much sense! How did I miss that?!”

You laugh. “I know, right? Like if there's the cross-universe fated-connection thingie it seems so obvious now that you have to be the same person!”

Dirk and Dave go back to what they were doing.

“Oh *hell* no…” Rose says. “You’re kidding me.”

You shrug. “I mean, it happens. Small empire I guess?”

“Indubitably. But, no, I think you’re missing the scope of this.”

The door opens and Karkat comes in.
“I thought you were going back to sleep,” you say.

“I’ll be right back usually means ‘I have to take a piss,’ not I’m leaving the house.’ So I got curious. Sue me.”

Rose continues on, ignoring the both of you. “Honestly, I was a bit surprised when Roxy told me she was dating a human, but she was open about it early on. And I’ve come to expect this kind of impulsive behavior from Dave—”

“Hey!”

“. Not that it gives you a free pass, but there’s at least precedent. But you Dirk? You were supposed to be the responsible one!”

“What did I walk into?” Karkat asks.

“Oh, nothing major!” Rose says, making it sound incredibly major. “But I think my siblings have forced my hand. I guess I have to be John’s consort now. Can female vampires even have children?”

“No,” Dave pipes up.

“Then we’ll just have to make something up! I have no idea how we’ll do it, but it seems I have little choice. I’d hate to ruin a perfect set!”

“Huh?” you ask.

“In my defense,” Dirk says, yanking his shirt over his head. “For me it’s less dating, more sleeping with, and you know that’s a thing I do.”

Dave scoffs. "Yeah right. It's not just sleeping with after almost a decade."

“It hasn't been that long,” Dirk scoffs.

"Hey John," Dave says with a smirk. "How old are you?"

"Twenty one. But I don’t get what that-"

"Fuck," Dirk says. "Okay, but not all of us are that good at keeping track of time. Besides, Karkat can probably vouch for me."

“I can what?” He asks, blinking. You’re about ninety percent sure he’s either thinking “it’s too early for this shit” and/or “fuck it, I should have stayed in bed.”

“Okay, so imagine John but about six inches shorter, with a rounder, softer ass and a penchant for skin-tight leather armor. Then tell me you wouldn’t tap that if you had the chance.” Wait, Jake?! You had the feeling that by the time he was nineteen he was sneaking off to see someone, but a vampire? No wonder he refused to tell you.

Karkat looks off thoughtfully. “Yeah, he does have a point.”

“Karkat, no!” You say.

“Would it help if I said I was imagining a threesome?”

“What? No! Thank you all for the mental images I will be stuck with for the rest of my life. Just
please, please, do not say anything about Jade.”

“Hey, why not Jade?” Dave demands. Oh no, please divines and daedra no.

“Because she's basically my sister. And I remember us sharing a bed and baths and stuff with her when we were little!”

“Look, just because the two of us have done that same stuff now in a slightly sexier way-”

“Oh my gods,” you bury your head in your hands. “And those were exactly the images I wanted to avoid. Thanks, Dave.”

Rose pats you on the shoulder. “If it helps, it does get easier to accept after a while. There’s only so many times you can catch someone with their trousers down before shock turns into mild annoyance.”

“Okay. I think I’m going to go curl up and die now,” you say, opening the door.

”Man, if he’s this sensitive, the day before we take on Sovngarde might be more fun than I thought,” Roxy muses.

You leave before any of them can say anything else. Karkat gives you an awkward side hug as you walk back to the house you claimed. At least somebody’s there for you.

Chapter End Notes

If any of you are worried about it being like ten years since Jake and Dirk got together, Jake is about 7 years older than John. Jake was 18 when he and Dirk got together.
It’s not that far to the wind stone. You saw it in the distance on the way to the village for the first time. It's surrounded by Nords, and they all murmur that same chant over and over. The monolith reaches up to the sky, supported by more stones and some scaffolding.

“Ready?” You ask John.

“As I’m gonna be,” he replies. He rolls his shoulders, takes a deep breath, and shouts.

The stones surrounding the main pillar shatter, and the people around it freeze. Their arms go limp and they drop their tools into the water, but they don't move or make any sort of indication that they've woken up.

"Not enough to break the spell," you say. You keep your hands on your sickles but walk towards the people. You get the feeling that something is deeply unnatural and your stomach churns.

John gasps. "Karkat! Watch out!"

You look around and see nothing, then look down. The water around your feet has turned black as tar. It begins to bubble and you try to back away, but you're not quite fast enough. A massive fishlike monster rises from the muck. It has to be at least twelve feet tall. You realize that the fishlike components are confined to scaly parts on its head, hands, feet, and a few places on its torso. The rest of its skin is a clammy-looking pink, too tight in some places and hanging loose in others. It turns its strange dull eyes on you and the slit pupils twitch.

…Well shit.

It roars and swings a long troll-like arm at you. You try to leap out of the way but you can't quite make it. Instead it catches you and sends you flying right into the pillar. You catch it with your shoulder first, and then your head cracks back against the rock.

You slide down the pillar and fall into the water. It hurts. Your head hurts and your side hurts, but you can't focus. You're not sure why. There are loud noises, some from people and some from monsters. Something gloopy is sliding over your skin. You close your eyes, just for a moment. You need to rest. Maybe you'll feel better after.

Karkat crumples against the monument. You call his name but he doesn’t respond. The people that had been working the monument snap out of their trance. They scream, start running away from the pool as fast as they can. But not you. Instead you summon your hammer and armor and charge forward, shouting yourself ahead.

The creature doesn’t seem to notice. It tries to follow the fleeing nords, but stops before it reaches the edge of the water. Then it growls and turns back to Karkat.

“No you don’t!” You roar.

You swing your hammer and hit it in the side. The creature staggers and looks around. It doesn’t seem to see you. Instead it turns back to Karkat. What the hell?
“Hey, asshole! You’ve got to fight me first!” You swing your hammer again, aiming for the same spot you hit before.

The monster screeches, turns around, but it doesn’t fall. What even is this thing? The wind shift and its form seems to wobble a bit. Well that’s weird. You hit it a third time and it finally dies. But instead of collapsing normally its body dissipates into black smoke. The black ooze retreats, leaving clear, fresh water. The air smalls of swamp and dead fish.

Wait a second… You channel a conjuration spell, but the sphere of purple light in your hand refuses to stay uniform.

“You were a daedra…” You murmur.

But there’s no time to think about the implications of that. Instead you rush to Karkat’s side, propping his head up. He groans softly but doesn’t open his eyes. You can’t tell what’s wrong with him, so you ready a general healing spell and place your hand on his cheek.

“Come on, Karkat,” you say.

After a moment his body starts to respond. He soaks up the energy you offer him, but you can’t control where it goes. You just have to trust his body to do what it needs to. But it sucks not to know, especially since he hit his head and all kinds of shit can happen when you get a concussion. Eventually, he stops taking the healing. You just hold him and pray.

He groans again and this time he opens his eyes.

“Thank Kynereth…” You breathe. You pull him in a tight hug but then remember that just because he’s awake doesn’t mean he’s alright.

You pull away and look hard at his face. His pupils are the same size, gaze clear and focused on you. Well, that’s a good sign at least.

He blinks. “Uh, what?”

“Do you feel dizzy?” You ask. “Nauseous?”

He shakes his head. “I’m okay. It just got me by surprise.”

“Hmm… if you say so. It looked like you hit your head pretty hard.”

“I’m fine, John.” He pulls his helmet off and you can’t help but wince. There’s a huge gash across his forehead where the edge of it bit into his skin on impact. He’s covered in muck and it’s seeping into the wound.

”That bad?”

”Let me just…”

You pull out a cloth, dip it in the now-clear water and start dabbing lightly at his face, not wanting to cause any more damage. Thankfully, the muck comes off easily, and the cut is bleeding enough that it’s washing itself out pretty effectively. You channel a more focused healing spell and trace your fingertips over his forehead. The skin heals over and you wipe the last of the blood away.

“What happened?” He asks.

“After it went for you I managed to get a couple solid hits in. It was strange, the thing didn’t even
try to defend itself…”

“A couple of hits? From Vrillyhoo?”

"Yeah."

"What the fuck was it? A goddamn dragon?!

You sigh. “No. Daedra.”

"Still you've killed atronachs in one hit before," he says, frowning.

"Yeah, well, this was stronger. Like a lot stronger."

"So like a fish dremora or something?"

"Worse."

"I thought that was as strong as daedra got."

"On Nirn, yeah.” You give him one last look over and then shove the cloth back into a pocket. “It shouldn’t have been able to survive outside of Oblivion. They’re only stable close to their original planes.”

“Then what is it doing here?”

You run your fingers through your hair. “That’s what I wanna know.”

“ Aren’t you supposed to be a fucking expert?”

You give him a dirty look.

“Sorry.”

“We should head back,” you help him to his feet. “By now Rose and Dave should be done with their stuff. Hopefully they can help.”

Everyone else is long gone. Now it’s just you, Karkat, and the stone monolith. Before you walk away you give the pillar one last look, but then it starts calling to you, pulling you towards it with some strange, powerful magic.

“John?” Karkat says.

“Hang on a sec.”

“Shit, please don’t make this like Raven Rock. I don’t want to have to drag you five miles.”

“You won’t,” you say. “This one will be fine.”

“How do you know?”

“Donno. But it feels good. This is a totally different kind of magic from last time.”

Karkat rolls his eyes, but you choose to ignore him. The glyph carved into the rock glows a light blue.

“See? That’s a nice friendly color. And a nice friendly shape!”
“It’s two squiggles.”

“I like ‘em,” you say firmly. You reach out and touch the stone.

*It’s warm.* You think.

The wind picks up dramatically. Out of the corner of your eye, you see it blowing things around and around not thirty feet away. But here everything is still. The water doesn’t so much as ripple. Karkat breathes so heavily you can feel it.

“What’s wrong?” You ask.

He looks at you strangely. “Um, nothing?” He speaks normally, but there’s a weird physical force behind the words.

And he does look fine. He *looks* like he’s breathing normally, but then why can you feel it? He reaches towards you and you feel the motion before he even makes contact with you. You take a step back, but your movement seems to extend outside of your physical body.

You close your eyes, and the feeling comes into even sharper focus. It’s like an afterimage, kind of blurry but burned into your mind.

“John? John, what’s happening?” His words feel ragged, chipped on the edges with the roughness of his voice.

The wind outside dies down, and then you’re assaulted by the breeze as it returns, winding around the stone, around Karkat, around you. It’s like having a blindfold torn off and immediately looking at the sun.

You can’t. You stagger backwards, covering your ears and tucking your face between your elbows.

“John!” His voice is muffled, but you still feel his words. No, you feel his *breath*. You feel the shape of the air. The awareness is sharpest when something moves, but the air itself everywhere. There’s nothing you can do to escape it.

You stumble but Karkat catches you, helps guide you down to the ground slowly, gently. He runs his fingers through your hair and starts singing softly. Singing is better than words, the air moves more smoothly, his breath more measured and predictable. Slowly, you start adjusting to this new awareness. First you take your hands off of your ears, letting noise back in, and then after a little bit longer you open your eyes.

“Thanks,” you say.

Karkat lets out a sigh of relief. It feels like down. “What happened?” he asks. The sharpness of it makes you wince.

“I don’t know,” you say. “I just started feeling things and I- it was a lot.”

“Like emotionally or…?”

“No, physically.”

He gives you a long, hard look and then closes his eyes. “Well, as long as it’s over now.”

“It’s not. But I think I’m okay.” You detangle yourself from him and stand. The breeze continues, bending around you and him and the stone. But it’s not painfully bright like it was before.
“You sure?”

“No,” you admit. “But we need to keep moving.”

He starts to say something. You can feel the words beginning to form in his throat – and fuck that’s weird – but he seems to think better of it. You start walking and he follows, making up nonsense explanations as to how the daedra managed to get itself here. You’re only half listening. A big ugly bruise is starting to form on the right side of his face. You’re not sure you want to see what’s happening under his armor. You’ll have to deal with that when you get back to the village.

Honestly, you’re not certain why John and Karkat were in such a rush this evening. The two of them set off before sunset, which is quite a shame since it only took you and Dave about an hour to figure out what to do next and you really would have appreciated using tonight to start your search for the books.

Because there’s not just one book. In fact, there seem to be an awful lot of them scattered all over the place, and all of them have similar, but not quite identical, magics. It looks as though there will be an awful lot of wandering around the island until you find the right one to fight Miraak.

It seems the first step is to head south. You have centuries of experience, but dealing with Daedric Princes is not your area of expertise, so it would be prudent to consult an expert. And your vision told you just where to find one.

Unfortunately, you won’t be able to make it tonight. You don’t leave until tomorrow evening. It must take the boys a while to get back. For the first time in a long time, you regret your vampiric state of being. Or you at least wish you’d spent more of your absurdly long life working on darkness spells so you could make some damn progress.

“Rose,” Dave says, “Chill.”

“I haven’t said anything,” you retort.

“No, but you look fucking constipated which means you’re doing an internal monologue rant.”

“Okay, fine, but it’s not as though I’m being over dramatic. Wandering off is no problem at all, mortals. We’re just trying to stall the end of the world!”

“It’ll be fine. We’ll make it.”

“That’s easy for you to say. Some of us haven’t had our senses of urgency dulled by centuries of hopping around to whenever we please!”

“Again,” he says. “Rose, chill. You saw it yourself. It'll be fine. Let’s go to the meeting hall and get a drink or something. Otherwise we could just skip ahead just a little bit and-“

Roxy throws the door open. “Hey, guys! Guess what?”

“Lord English showed up and says he’s sorry for troubling us he just wants to be friends and brought a giant-ass apology cake?” Dave asks.

“Pfft, I wish.”

“Good. That probably would have meant a party and I left my nice dress at home.”

"The sad thing is with how quickly the fashions change I can't even tell if you're joking or not," you
“Oh, shush,” Roxy says with a laugh. “No, the villagers are back!”

“So John and Karkat have succeeded,” You say.

“Yep! And, Dave, you might have wanted to get that dress because it turns out there is a party. Be quiet for a sec and listen.”

Then you hear it, the chorus of voices from outside. You know this song. You haven’t heard at all it in centuries, haven’t heard it properly in millennia but they- they still-

“Come outside,” Roxy says in the old language. “I know you remember this too.”

You get to your feet and step out into the night. You join the others around the fire and let go of all the time you’ve had to bear.

By the time you stumble back into the village a massive bonfire is burning in the square. There’s music and dancing and laughter and everyone’s speaking some language you don’t recognize. Fire feels really weird with this new power, though. You can’t feel the heat per-se, but it bends the air, makes it get bigger and go up and up and thinking about it too hard makes your head spin.

You just focus on trying to get Karkat back into the house you claimed. You get the hearth burning and try not to pay attention to the weird flippy thing it’s doing to the air. Instead you focus your awareness on him, "watching" as he undoes his armor, carefully removing each piece and setting it to the side. You’re so familiar with the motions that just feeling them instead of seeing them doesn’t feel too unsettling.

"Ugh, there’s so many dents in this thing," he says. “Fuck, and we don’t have time to get a new set made. Maybe now that the smith is back in town he can patch it up?”

"I don't think that's a good idea," you say, turning back to him.

"Yeah, it'll be weaker, but-"

"-But if we're gonna be fighting more of those daedra having it be any weaker might be a problem."

He rolls his eyes and starts pulling his clothes off.

"Holy shit…"

"Oh please, don't make jokes about whoever owns this house walking in. I'm not in the mood for those sorts of shenanigans." He wrings his shirt out over the chamber pot.

"No, it's not that. You're just…” In horrible shape? beaten to a pulp? Purple all the way down your fucking side how much blood has been leaking out into your skin? "Dude, lay down."

"I'm fine, really," he protests.

"You're-" you bite your tongue. No, you've gone over this. "Just let me patch you up a little more, okay? I wanna make sure you’re in top shape when we fight one of those things again. Do it for me?" You pout a little bit, knowing he can’t say no to that.

He sighs. "Fine." He climbs back onto the bed, trying to hide his wince as he lays down on his
belly and grumbling to himself. “You’re six feet tall and like 250 pounds, how are you so damn cute?”

You just laugh and run one hand down his spine to soothe him a little. “It’s a skill.”

Oh gods, where do you even start? You pull the lightest, gentlest magic you can muster into your hands. Just a little light probing so hopefully you can figure out how to- He yelps the moment you make contact.

"Ssssh. It's okay, baby, I've got you."

"Is this really necessary?"

"Almost done, just gotta see what I'm working with here."

He bites his lip. Shit, you're hurting him but... it’s for his own good... right? You have to move quickly. But, well, to be honest there isn't much to work with. Somehow he didn't break any bones, and it seems like the damage isn't deep, but anything anywhere near the surface has been reduced to absolute mush.

Fuck, you wish Jane was here. You're good with cuts and broken bones, but delicate stuff like this is more her specialty. Thankfully, it's Karkat. As awful as it is to see him like this, you know how his body is supposed to feel, how everything is supposed to fit together.

Remember, you think as you call the healing magic to your hands, light, gentle...

He tenses up when you make contact. Yeah, magic is great and it's better than leaving him like he is, but having your tissues knit themselves back together is still less than pleasant. You run your hand down his spine again (Not even any bruising on his back. Thank Akatosh. Spine injuries are way beyond you.) and whisper to him in Dunmeri.

"It's going to be okay. You're doing so well, beloved one." It's a little stuttering, and you're not entirely sure you conjugated that right, but still...

"Heh, you're getting better at that."

"Thank you. I'm trying."

He corrects your pronunciation gently, but he's obviously a bit more relaxed. You're not sure if it's because he appreciated that you're putting effort into learning his language, or because you're actually making progress on his wounds. Man, you still don't like how dark those bruises are, but there's not anything you can do about that.

But even with his injuries, Dibella's brush, he's beautiful. You weren't kidding about not liking seeing him this battered, but he's still the most flawless thing you've ever seen. You love every line, every curve, every inch of silver skin stretched over muscle or bone. He turns his head again and looks at you with one ruby-red eye and you kiss him because it's not like there's anything else you can do to someone like that. Someone so precious, so amazing.

Even if the position is awkward he gives back with all he’s got. Of course he does, Karkat never does anything by halves. When you pull back he looks at you, eyes overflowing with love. Your stomach lurches and you get an overwhelming need to protect, to make sure he's safe and warm and happy. And then comes the guilt, because you've been trying to take care of him this whole time and you've failed. You know it's not really your fault, but you can't help but think that maybe if you'd noticed more quickly, if you'd moved a bit faster…
"Hey," he says, "Get out of your head."

"Right, sorry."

"You don't have to apologize." He says.

"Hey, Karkat?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you do me a favor?"

He sighs a little melodramatically. "Does it involve moving?"

"No. But, for real, Karkat. If I ever hurt you, I want you to tell me. None of the tough guy stuff, none of the bearing it in silence. I wanna know so I can make things right and never do it again."

"Yeah, sure. Not like you're going to." He pushes himself up. "Anyway, that feels a lot better. Any way to get rid of the purple though?"

"No, your body has to reabsorb that slowly on its own. Also, I'm being serious, Karkat."

"So am I," he starts rummaging through his bag. "Magic is still dumb, but it's useful so we can keep the potions for later."

"Karkat!"

"What?" He pulls his civilian shirt out and goes back to looking. He's pointedly not making eye contact with you.

"Shit… I already fucked up, didn't I?"

"No. Stop worrying about it."

"Look at me and say that."

He lifts his gaze to meet yours. "John, you haven't hurt me. Unless you count stuff like that probing thing earlier which I know ends with me being better off, or accidentally stepping on my foot or whatever, which you usually apologize for right away anyhow."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," he says, and means it.

You smile. "I'm just glad you're a terrible liar or I probably wouldn't sleep tonight."

"Oh fuck off." He angrily tugs a new shift over his head.

"There's my baby!"

"I hate you."

"I love you too!" You kiss his forehead and he shoos you away, but he's blushing.

He's okay. You're okay. You tell yourself it's all going to be okay.
SO WE SET OFF JUST AFTER SUNSET. GOD THE STRILALONDES WERE INSUFFERABLE. IN ADDITION TO THE "FORGETTING MORTALS HAVE NEEDS" SHIT, NOW THAT DAVE KNOWS TALKING ABOUT JADE GETS UNDER JOHN'S SKIN HE WON'T FUCKING SHUT UP ABOUT IT. AND ROSE AND ROXY JUST MAKE THINGS WORSE, EGging HIM ON BY TALKING ABOUT THEIR SEX LIVES. SO I SPENT MOST OF THE NIGHT PLAYING FUCKING MODERATOR, BEING A GOOD SYMPATHETIC BOYFRIEND.

HONESTLY, JOHN SHOULD JUST FUCKING CALM HIS DAMN TITS ABOUT THE WHOLE THING. THEY'RE ADULTS FOR AZURA'S SAKE, AND IT'S NOT LIKE JOHN CAN PREACH ABOUT THE VIRTUES OF CELIBACY OR ANYTHING.

SOMETIMES HIS SPOILED RICH SIDE REALLY FUCKING SHOWS. NOT ALL OF US HAD THICK STONE WALLS IN GIANT FANCY-ASS CASTLES WHERE EVERYONE HAS PRIVATE ROOMS. SOME OF US HAD LITTLE THIN BARRIERS BETWEEN ROOMS AND FATHERS THAT ARE A LOT LESS QUIET IN BED THAN THEY LIKE TO THINK THEY ARE AND BROTHERS THAT ARE REALLY BAD AT HIDING THE FACT THAT THEY WERE JUST IN THE MIDDLE OF MASTURBATING.

IT'S GOOD WE GOT TO THE BEAST STONE WHEN WE DID, OR I WAS GOING TO SCREAM. JOHN GAVE ME HIS ARMOR, BECAUSE MINE IS MORE OR LESS TRASHED. THE SHIRT ITSELF IS LOOSE, AND TO BE HONEST IT REMINDS ME OF WHEN I WAS LITTLE AND HAD TO WEAR KANKRI'S OLD HAND ME DOWNS. I CAN'T SUMMON THE ARMOR STUFF MYSELF, BUT APPARENTLY HE CAN PUT IT ON ME AND IT FITS BECAUSE MAGIC. BUT FUCK IS IT HEAVY. I'M STARTING TO GET WHERE ALL HIS STUPID MUSCLES COME FROM.

LUCKILY IT TURNS OUT THAT IF WE DRAW THE DAEDRA FAR ENOUGH AWAY FROM THE STONE ITS FORM GOES ALL WOBBLY AND THEN IT MELTS. WEIRD, RIGHT? BUT WHATEVER WORKS. JOHN AND ROSE BABBLED ON ABOUT THE MAGIC INVOLVED TO EACH OTHER FOR LIKE FIVE MINUTES, AND I UNDERSTOOD ABOUT TEN PERCENT OF IT. WHATEVER, AS LONG AS WE KNOW HOW TO KILL THEM SAFELY. WE TOOK OUT A SECOND STONE ON THE WAY TOO.

APPARENTLY THIS ISLAND ISN'T ALL REDORAN. THIS LITTLE CORNER BELONGS TO A TELVANI WIZARD. THERE AREN'T THAT MANY POWERFUL MAGES ON THIS ISLAND SO EVERYONE JUST CALLS HIM ARCHAGAHARIN WITHOUT ANY FURTHER IDENTIFICATION.

HE THINKS THE PARTICULAR BLACK BOOK WE'RE LOOKING FOR IS IN SOME DWEMER RUINS CALLED NCHARDAK WHICH ARE ONLY A COUPLE MILES AWAY. WE'RE SPENDING THE DAY HERE IN HIS GIANT MUSHROOM… HOUSE… THING. TELVANI ARE WEIRD.

BUT WHATEVER, THE SOONER WE CAN GET DONE HERE, THE SOONER WE CAN GET TO WHITERUN AND START GETTING READY FOR THE REAL FIGHT.

John's gone when you wake up. You hate it when he does that. He’s supposed to stay there and help keep you warm. And yeah, okay, maybe you like how he wraps his arms around you and tucks your head under his chin and makes you feel small in the best way, but he’s such a good furnace that you always unconsciously kick off half the blankets you went to sleep with and once
he decides he has something better to do you wake up shivering. At least this mushroom is pretty
draft resistant.

But no, instead of doing his duty as your boyfriend he's outside playing with the apprentice. So you
have to get dressed and go outside to even say hi.

"That's why it's being so difficult!" He says, throwing a book onto a nearby mushroom stump.

"What do you mean?" The apprentice asks.

"You're trying to do this weird reach around through three planes of Oblivion! Why would you do
that?"

"Huh, where does it say that?"

"I mean, it doesn't, but can't you feel it? Like, ash spawn completely different from daedra, more
like some kind of undead. But you're trying to take them and pull them down and then back up.
That's gonna take way more effort."

The apprentice looks at John very strangely. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Well, necromancy isn't really my thing. But try modifying a reanimate dead to be all ash spawn-
y."

"All ash spawn-y," the apprentice repeats flatly.

"Yeah!"

"Don't listen to a damn word he says," you say. "He's a compulsive liar."

"Oh! Hi, Karkat!" He hops over and kisses your forehead. "We're talking about magicy things!"

"I gathered."

"You know, your guys' magic is so weird! There's a lot more reading involved."

"I'm not fucking Telvani," you grumble.

"That's just how it's done!" The apprentice objects.

"Nuh-huh. That's just the way you do it. But anyway, they also had a couple extra sets of robes, so
you can keep my armor for now."

You groan. "Do I have to?"

He frowns. "Look, I know it's not really your thing, but it'll help keep you safe."

Ugh, the more things change, the more your boyfriend stays the same. You make a note to save his
ass at some point in the near future to remind him that you're actually competent. But for now you
just grunt, "Fine."

The door to one of the other mushrooms opens and Dave and Roxy come out.

"Where are the other two?" You ask.

"Rose and Dirk want to study Neloth's stuff," Roxy says. "Since Dave and I are a little less
magically inclined, we thought we'd come dungeon diving with you!"

"Neloth?" John asks.

"The mage?" Roxy replies, raising and eyebrow.

"Oh! Is that his real name?"

"Look, just because it's his private name doesn't mean it's more real…” You say.

"Yeah, but I think he knows it would be weird to call himself a master mage when Rose is around." Dave shrugs.

John gasps excitedly. "That is what that means! I love how you guys just combine words to make new words. It's so cute!"

The apprentice looks rightfully offended.

You roll your eyes. "Don't take it personally. John thinks everything is cute."

"Only when it's related to you!"

"Fucking Azura…” You say. You're blushing like crazy. You turn away before he can call that cute too. Not in front of another Dunmer…” "Are we gonna go or not?"

"We need Neloth first," Dave says. "And Rose should send him down in three, two, one…”

The door to the main mushroom opens and Archagaharin strides out confidently.

"Well," he says, "What are we waiting for? Nchardak awaits!"

You head back north sticking close to the shore. After about half an hour you see some towers in the distance sticking out of the sea. Thank every god there is. After this is over you’re not going to miss all the walking, especially not on days you're already sore, but you should at least get there soon.

Except that you don’t. Stupid flat areas, making things look significantly closer than they really are. At least with mountainous terrain you can tell how far away your goal is. It takes a full two hours until you finally arrive at the ruins. Archa- fuck it, you're switching to calling him Neloth too. Everyone else fucking is. – Neloth keeps yammering on about the history of the ruins the entire time. You should probably be paying attention in case any of it is useful for helping with your mom’s quest thing, but he’s stuck on the technology bit instead of anything to do with the slaves that built it. So you’re probably safe ignoring him for the most part.

Whatever, at least Dave isn’t tormenting John anymore.

The way to the entrance is precarious. Many of the towers have long since crumbled, but a number of the gates and pieces of stonework have also fallen to create unsteady bridges. You're just glad John ditched the ebony armor. Between the twists and corrosion in the metal and the slickness of the spray you feel like the odds of him falling into the sea would have been pretty damn high, and with like 130 pounds of metal strapped to him he’d sink like a stone. As it is, you're pretty sure at least one of you would have wound up in the water if John wasn’t keeping the wind down.

Neloth pulls a strange cube from his bag and places it in a pedestal near the door. “Here, we’ll need this. I locked the ruins the last time I was here to keep any unsavory types from looting the place.”
“Right,” you say. “Because the risk of drowning wasn’t enough of a deterrent. And it’s not like it’s been here for centuries without that extra protection.”

“Know your place, child,” he growls. “I can’t imagine the problems they must be having in Windhelm to let a brat like you wander around on your own…”

“Hey!” John says. “He’s almost twenty!”

“Exactly. Ought to have at least another decade to shape up. What were your parents even thinking?”

John’s about to say something to defend you, but you elbow him before he says anything incriminating.

Instead, Neloth just opens the door and strides inside.

And there it is. The book is trapped in the floor beneath a pane of glass.

"So close and yet so far, eh?" Neloth asks. "But there's no magic that will open that. I know, I've tried every trick I know."

"Okay, but have you tried smashing it?" John asks.

"What? Why on earth would I attempt to-"

"Good enough for me." Dave leaps into the air and thrusts his sword down against the glass. There's a light tink but the glass isn't even scratched. Dave glares down with confusion in his eyes.

John snorts.

"What? You think you can do better, Egbert?"

"Um, yeah?" He summons his hammer and brings it down. Hard.

Well, to his credit he manages to make a bit more noise. His hit makes a smack that reverberates through the room, but you still don't hear the kssh of shattering glass.

"What the fuck is that even made of?!" You demand. Because, seriously, you've seen John crack solid stone with that thing.

"That glass is the pinnacle of Dwemer engineering," Neloth says proudly, as though he had anything to do with it.

"Well, you've gotta have some idea, of how to get in, or else why'd you bring us here?" Roxy asks.

"Indeed, I do. Follow me."

He heads to a lift and the five of you descend.

The lift takes you to into one of those great chambers that the Dwemer were apparently so fucking fond of. It’s basically the same as all of the other ones except for the fact it’s completely flooded with seawater.

"This," Neloth says, "is the Great Chamber of Nchardak. This room contains not only the pumps that once made this city inhabitable, but also the great steam engines which powered much of the complex, including the reading room above."
"Great," Dave says, "Any idea how to turn 'em back on?"

Neloth places the cube in one of the pedestals and the water level drops dramatically, revealing four more pillars on the level below. "I believe we will need five of these cubes. One to activate the pumps, keeping the engines above the water, and the other four to activate the engines themselves. The way through will likely be treacherous, and I'm not sure how spread out the remaining cubes will be. It may take days for us to explore the city deeply enough to-"

"I mean, we could do that but it sounds really dumb," Dave says. "I've got a better idea."

"Oh really? What might that be?"

There's a blinding flash of red light below. When it recedes, four Daves stand on the platform, each holding a cube. They place their cubes on the pillars and all at once the steam engines turn on.

"My idea is time travel makes everything better," he says.

Roxy laughs. "Oh my gosh, Neloth, your face!" Yeah, okay, she has a point. That slack-jawed expression on that pretentious fuckwit is great. "Oh, Dave, this is why we keep you around."

"Awww, sis, I thought you loved me."

She laughs again. "Of course I do, widdle Davy-wavy!" She throws her arms around him, pulling him close, but he shakes her off.

"Fucking All-Maker. Just go upstairs and come get me when you're done with the steam so I can make this timeloop stable."

She sticks out her tongue and prances over to the lift. Honestly, that kind of teasing almost makes you a little homesick. Almost.

When you return upstairs, Neloth heads over and presses the button. Lights focus, the glass case opens, and a pillar raises from out of the floor. What is it with Dwemer and pillars? Seriously, everything is a pillar with these guys and you are totally starting to sound like Karkat. Whoops.

Roxy heads back to the lift, probably going to tell Dave you're done.

And there's the black book. It just sits there calmly but it's exuding its twisted magic all over the place. It feels almost but not exactly like the other one, and you still don't like it. Its presence is cold, almost slimy and deeply uncanny. Karkat looks at you expectantly.

"Right," you say, "um, I guess I should do this."

You're not sure why you feel so apprehensive about touching it. After all, it's just a gate object. You've been playing with these your whole life. You'll be absolutely fine.

Then you actually open the book. The words glow a pale, unearthly green. This doesn't feel right. The words leap off of the page and wrap around you, squeezing tightly. Okay, this is really not right. The light digs into your skin and it hurts. This isn't supposed to hurt. Usually interacting with Oblivion is almost intoxicatingly good.

*Push against it.* The thought comes unbidden, not quite *yours* but when every other part of you agrees they're usually right.
So you do as they say. It's not something that could be explained or understood, but you force it all back. The words explode out, expanding to fill the whole room. When they reach the walls they stick, the light spreading until it covers every inch of the surface.

Oops.
And then the green light fades. You stumble a bit, but just manage to keep your balance. Karkat and Neloth fall all the way to the floor.

You stand on a small stone island surrounded by thick black water that extends off as far as you can see and the sky above is a pale olivey green. And it feels… really weird. If Mania feels like early summer and Dementia feels like leaves and mist, this feels like resin that’s not quite dry. But it’s not bad.

Actually, as rough as passing through that gate was, now that you're here it actually feels pretty good. Not quite Shivering Isles good, but-

"John, what the fuck did you do?!" Karkat demands, getting to his feet.

You wince. "Okay, I might have panicked a little."

Karkat's jaw drops and he just stares at you.

"Look, I'm sorry! I didn't know this would happen!"

"Okay, that's fine. Why the fuck are you glowing?"

You look down. Well, he's right, but it's not anything *spectacular*. You think it’s actually not quite as strong as it is in the Shivering Isles. "What do you mean? You've seen me like this before."

"Fucking *when*?! You were *not* like this last time we went to Oblivion!"

"Oh! That's probably because we were in the palace! Basically everything there glows. Heh, I guess it just shows up better here because the light here is so dingy. I should take you out to see the rest of the realm next time!"


"Only on my dad's side," you say, not making eye contact. You've never heard someone make such a big deal out of it before. Not that you've told that many people. Honestly, having him talk about it like that makes you a little self conscious.

"How is that even possible?! You stayed on the mortal plane for *days*.

"Well, I mean, my body’s human enough..." But you don't really wanna talk about this anymore. Mages tend to be inquisitive types, and you don't want him asking personal questions or, worse, actually trying to do some little experiments on you here or back on Solstheim.

There's an open book just up ahead, and you get the feeling you should look at it. You stride over and the words swirl before you, refusing to stand still for you to read them. Rude! You reach out to touch it, but as soon as your fingers make contact there’s a flash of light and, ooh, now you're on a different platform. This one is springy and full of holes. Weird. You bounce on it a little bit and it flexes under your weight.
"Don't break it!" Karkat snaps.

"Don't worry! I'll be fine! Ooh what's over there?"

There's a tunnel up ahead that flexes back and forth across the thick black water. You don't quite wait for it to make contact with your platform. Instead, you just hop the slight gap. The smooth movement of the ground under your feet is weird and you like it.

"Hey! Wait up!" Karkat leaps into the tunnel after you, shortly followed by Neloth.

"What are you doing?" The wizard demands, "Aren't you supposed to be looking for Miraak's secrets?"

You wave him off. "Psssh, we'll know what we're looking for when we see it."

"John, are you feeling okay?" Karkat asks, "You're acting kind of-

Hey! There are flying pages up ahead. That's cool! You wander towards them.

"John? John! Seriously, what the fuck?"

You look back. Gosh, he does look worried. You should probably do something to make him feel better. "Yeah, I'm fine." He gives you an incredulous look. "Oh! Right! You were in the Shivering Isles for a few hours but you weren't with me for more than a minute!"

"So?"

"So," you stroll back over to him. "When I'm in Oblivion I tend to get a little... well, manic for lack of a better term. I mean, the alternative is getting gloomy and depressed like Dad does so I'm fine with it. It's a little weird, because my brain starts running really fast and I get tons of energy, but it's not bad."

Karkat frowns. Aw, that's no good. You wrap your arms around him and kiss him. "Seriously, Karkat. Don't worry. I'm used to this. I'm still in control."

He opens his mouth to say something, but it's then that the angry mops decide to attack.

Okay, so they're not really mops, but they are angry. You're not entirely sure what else to call them, since they're really just floating strips of cloth and tentacles tiny arms and tinier eyes. And they're trying to send pulses through the air at you. Awww, that's so cute! You just push the pulse right back and hit one of them in the face. The other goes invisible and when it comes back there's two!

Except no, no there aren't. The air passes right through where one of them is floating.

"It's an illusion!" You say. "Get the one on the left!"

Karkat runs up and sticks his sickles in its face. It collapses into a pile of rags, and the other one vanishes.

"Okay, I change my mind this wind power is awesome and I love it," you say.

"Wind power?" Neloth asks.

"Don't worry about it," Karkat says. He starts walking toward the end of the tunnel.
It moves on this side too, and across the water there's a weird glowey flower thing.

You need to touch it.

So you jump across and do. Duh.

The glowey flower closes up. Aw man… But a huge gate swings open on a little island not far away. Huh, it looks like there’s some kind of big-

"John! Look out!" Karkat shouts.

A massive black tentacle reaches out of the muck and tries to swat at you. You leap out of the way and hit it with a pulse of chaos magic. And now it’s a lovely scarf, but it sinks back down into the gross black goo before you can get it. Oh well.

"Are you okay?" Karkat asks.

"Yeah! Now this is getting kinda fun!"

You hop back into the tunnel. Ugh, why does it go so slow? You want to move.

But eventually it gets you to the little island with the gate. You charge forward, and then realize there's one of those massive fish monsters just inside. You freeze, but it doesn't react.

Well that's weird.

Instead it turns its attention to Karkat and Neloth, who are still in the tunnel.

"Uh, hi?" You say. It still doesn't react to you. "Oh! You don't know I'm here, do you? Like last time, right?"

Neloth hits the creature with a thunderbolt, and it tries to rush forward. You're not letting one of these things get Karkat. Not again. You grab its leg and fill it with as much magic as you can muster. The creature melts and dribbles through the holes in the floor.

Huh, that went well.

Karkat steps out onto the platform. "Can you do that back in Tamriel?"

"Maybe? Donno. Chaos magic is a lot stronger here."

"Why?" Neloth asks.

"Always 'reasons' with you. I mean, probably because we're closer to the Shivering Isles, which means we're closer to the source of- oh! I have an idea!"

"Hoo boy," Karkat says.

"Next monster! Let's go!" You run ahead to the next book and touch it.

You appear in a tunnel of weird black membranes. And there's another glowey flower. You touch it and the flower closes up again. The membranes peel back, revealing an open arena.

An open arena that is full of two giant fish monsters and a whole bunch of angry mops.

Perfect!
"Not sure if this will work," you say, preparing your summoning spell. "But if it does it's gonna be really freaking cool!"

You finish the summoning and something's coming, there's just the question of if it'll stick…

The purple cloud grows and then dissipates. A massive golden grummite appears. It's shorter than the other daedra, but significantly broader. Plus he has actual weapons.

"Fish monster versus fish monster! Place your bets!"

One of the angry mops tries to attack your grummite because it's a dick.

"Hey! I wanna see this!" You hit it with your hammer and it explodes.

Karkat and Neloth don't seem too interested in the fishy smackdown and are instead focusing on trying to kill more of the mops. Well, if anything happened to either of them it would suck. So you blast the rest of the mops off and resume observing the fish fight.

"What the fuck is that thing?!!" Karkat demands

"It's a grummite," you say.

"Yeah okay, but what is it?"

"A giant fish monster. Come on, Karkat. I would have thought that was obvious."

"But you summoned it."

"Yep."

"Why would you do that?!"

"Because giant fish fight. Duh."

He lets out a long suffering sigh, but stands beside you to watch.

"Fascinating," Neloth says. "I've never seen such a creature before. How do you summon them? Are the stable on the mortal plane? Do-"

"Shhh," you say. "Just watch."

They continue battering each other, but eventually your grummite triumphs, shoving its spear through the fish monster's chest.

Fuck. Yes.

"Good job! You can go now." With a wave of your hand you dismiss the creature. Neloth starts to ask you more stupid boring questions, so you just head up the stairs to the next book.

And now you're on a massive terrace. It's completely bare, no sign of danger whatsoever. The air is as non-magic as it gets in Oblivion. Up ahead is another book, but it's closed this time. Oh, you do not trust this one bit.

"Stay back," you tell Karkat and Neloth.

Neloth is about to say something. Of course he is.
"Because I'm quicker and tougher like this. And besides, you're a mage. You're better at range."

Cautiously you approach the book, Vrillyhoo in hand. You summon most of your armor, but you don’t want to compromise your vision so you leave your helmet. Because a giant daedra is totally going to appear any second now and try to hit you with a sneak attack. You just know it.

There we go! Once you get a few steps away, the sky ripples and thunder crashes around you. But, um, even though you were expecting a big old daedra, you weren’t quite prepared when black tentacles the size of tree trunks force their way through a rift in the sky. Dozens of eyes appear and lock onto you.

"Of course," Hermaeus Mora says. "There aren't many creatures that could create such disruption in my realm, but a princeling of madness… Yes, that would do it."

"Yeah… sorry about that!" You say. "But we had a really good reason!"

"Enlighten me."

"We were- Wait, shit, what were we doing? Sorry, sometimes it gets real hard to focus here…"

"We're trying to figure out the source of Miraak's power," Karkat supplies.

"Yeah, that!"

The god laughs, multiple eyes blinking at slightly different times. "Ah, that does make sense. Almost too much sense for one of your line. But it is intriguing to actually meet one of you." The largest eye comes closer. You can see yourself reflected in its strange double pupil. One of the thinner tentacles comes closer to you hovers near your face but doesn’t quite make contact. The god continues speaking, voice slightly softer than before. “Even this close your thoughts are obscured… though I see you I cannot know you, even as I can know everything that has ever transpired in the lives of the two behind you-"

You glance over your shoulder. Neloth is purposefully staring at his shoes. Karkat is desperately avoiding eye contact while blushing up a storm. Then you realize it’s probably not a good idea to take your eyes off a daedric prince that’s not on particularly good terms with Sheogorath and turn back toward him.

Hermaeus Mora sighs. "Yes, including that, half-elf. But I am only as interested in the affairs of mortals as you would be in those of common animals. Take comfort in your insignificance. But you…" He looks back down at you, "I think perhaps the two of us might be able to make a deal."

"What is it you want?" you ask him.

"Information for information. As a sign of good faith, I will give you this piece of the spell you require, though you did not know you needed it."

An old Draconic word flashes across your mind, with the full understanding attached.

"This is the next piece of the manipulation shout," you say.

"Very good," Hermaeus Mora says, "Perhaps you are as gifted a dragonborn as Miraak. Take this; use it to bend mortals to your will."

You shake your head, trying to forget. "Um, no? I'm totally not gonna do that."
"You say that now, but we shall see."

He can't think you would really- wow, he doesn't know you. "So you already taught me something. Why would I help you now?"

"Because this alone will not defeat him. Miraak was once my acolyte and champion. All of his power is derived from my own, all of his knowledge gathered from my lessons. I can tell you how to defeat him, as the secret is in the last word of this spell, but I want a secret in return."

"Lemme guess, something related to chaos magic."

"Indeed. If you teach me its secrets, princeling, I will teach you how to defeat Miraak."

"I can't," you say.

"Cannot, or will not?"

"Cannot. I'm sorry, but I'm pretty sure you have to be born with it. Like it's a feeling and you just have to trust it'll be there."

"Hmm…” he closes his main eye for a moment. “I may not be able to see your thoughts, but I do sense your sincerity. Unfortunately, that will not suffice. Most Princes take souls, and though I could certainly learn much from possessing you, you've already been promised to your progenitor. In the best case scenario, you would simply be able to follow that tie back to the Shivering Isles in a matter of weeks.” He pauses for a moment. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to offer the soul of your firstborn?"

"Yeah, no."

"I might be willing to settle for the second."

"No,“ you say firmly.

He sighs. "I thought perhaps that would be too much. Mortals and your ties to kin… In that case, return to the Skaal. Speak to their shaman – Storn they call him."

"I know," you say. "We've been there before."

"Good. Then the job is half done. Convince him to reveal their ancient magic to me. Those insects have been hiding secrets from me for far too long."

"What if they don't want to talk?"

He hums. "Miraak would have done it for me. So will you if you want to defeat him and get your revenge."

...Huh? “What would I want revenge for? I’m just trying to stop Alduin and-”

“Are you really that unlike other mortals, or do you just not know?”

“Do I not know what?” Hopefully his desire to gloat will beat the desire to hold knowledge over your head.

“Hmm... perhaps it is less obvious if one is not omniscient. Well, I am feeling somewhat generous today, and this may provide you further motivation. Miraak is responsible for what happened in Corten.”
No. What? How is that even possible?! You gape up at him, unsure of what to say.

“Ahhh, so you are still affected by that sort of thing. Good to know. Let that drive you. For now, princeling, we are finished here.”

Hermaeus Mora dissolves back into the olive sky and the book opens.

It’s… it’s not like there’s anything else you can do here. You touch the book and the world goes white.

When you come to there’s a cool hand on your shoulder shaking you vigorously. You realize you’re sprawled out on the flagstones. You open your eyes and Roxy looks down at you, nibbling on her lower lip. As soon as she sees you’re awake her face lights up.

“Oh thank goodness! We came back and found you all passed out and you wouldn’t wake up.”

“Sorry…” you say.

“Seriously, what the fuck happened?” Dave demands.

Karkat pushes himself up into a sitting position, “John decided we needed a group field trip to Apocrypha is all. No big deal.”

With that much sarcasm he's begging to be teased. Normally you'd love to joke back at him, give him a hard time. But now…

*Miraak is responsible for what happened in Corten.*

Fuck. What do you even do with that kind of information?

"How?" Roxy asks, turning back to you. Like you know. Besides, the how is less important than that it happened and- oh, she's talking about going to Oblivion. Right. Not like she can read your mind. Not like anyone can, apparently.

"I donno. Daedric magic?" She’s still frowning. You glance away from her, but Karkat's giving you that same look. "I can’t explain it how I did it. I just did and it was fine. We found bunch of monsters and stuff, but then Hermaeus Mora showed up and I talked to him.”

Roxy gasps. “Really? What did he say?”

“He said… that he'd help us fight Scratch if we get him the secrets of the Skaal.”

"And those are…?" Dave asks.

"How should I know?" You snap. "They're called secrets for a reason.”

"John?" Karkat reaches over and places his hand on your arm. "You okay?" He's worried. You don't want him to worry.

"Yeah! No problem!" You force a smile and scramble to your feet. "Anyway, we should probably get going. Gotta make sure we get Roxy and Dave back to Neloth's before dawn!"

Karkat looks unimpressed as you help him up. You just hope he doesn't say anything. No, that's not true. You hope none of them say anything. Even if you can't really be alone, you still want some time to think.
The trip back is mercifully uneventful, but too quiet. John is covering something up. Every now and then he remembers he’s supposed to be happy and excited, but then he fades away back into his own head. He keeps his eyes on the ground ahead of him, but he’s really just following the rest of the group.

This isn’t just tired. Yeah, he’s doing the perking back up momentarily thing he does at the end of a long day, but usually if everything is fine the timing is based on something actually interesting and in between there’s more whining about how he just wants to go to bed. Now he just suddenly jolts to life every now and again more or less randomly, and there’s almost an air of desperation to it with nothing but empty silence in between.

It's utterly unconvincing. Even fucking *Neloth* keeps occasionally giving him concerned looks and he’s held off on asking questions. John’s one of those people with infectious moods, and just like he usually cheers you up, right now he’s covering everyone in a dark black cloud of “everything sucks.” You try to head it off, but it’s not like you’re a ray of sunshine at the best of times. So after two failures you give up.

But, hey, at least you make it back before the sun rises and Dave and Roxy start melting. Or whatever actually happens when vampires go out during the day. But they hustle inside quickly and Neloth goes with them, leaving the two of you alone.

“So,” you say, crossing your arms. “Want to tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“Nothing. I’m fine,” he says to the door.

You give him a look. He glances over at you but breaks eye contact quickly.

“Don't worry about it. Oblivion stuff. Like a magicy hangover thing?”

“Bullshit,” you growl, “After we went to the Shivering Isles you were perky and energetic for hours. I had to kick you out of the bedroom in the middle of the night so I could get some fucking sleep.”

“I just-“ He starts to say.

He’s expecting you to cut him off, to give him the way out by starting a rant. And you want to, but if you do you'll never find out what he’s trying to hide. No, he will deal with silence until he fucking tells you.

Or that’s your plan. But he just stares at you for a moment, and then looks away.

Okay, um, quiet. This is getting uncomfortable. Of course you break first. But at least you control the ranting urge.

“It’s about what Hermaeus Mora said, isn’t it?” You ask.

He stiffens. “How much do you know?”

“I know as soon as he said Coren or whatever you froze.”

“Corten,” he corrects.

“Okay, Corten. But what is that?”

“It’s a mountain range in Hammerfell.”
“And…?”

“And I don’t wanna talk about it.”

He heads back into the mushroom you're staying in and with an air of finality closes the door.

Now, if you were smart that would be the end of it. If you were a rational person you would give him space and time to collect himself and trust that if it was important that he, as your responsible partner, would let you know.

But instead you’re Karkat Vantas and you storm after him.

“John Egbert, you do not fucking run away from me!” you shout, slamming the door back open.

He turns and glares defiantly at you. The steward bolts past you and out of the cottage without a word. Well, at least someone has a sense of self-preservation.

“I’ll ask you again,” you say, barely managing to keep your voice measured. “What the fuck is going on?”

“We’re going to bed so we can leave early tonight, get back to the village, and be done,” he replies. He’s standing at his full height, shoulders squared, a clear “end of discussion” which is only furthered by the fact that he’s using that bullshit ‘proper’ accent like he thinks he can tell you what to do. Because of course he does.

But like hell he's getting away with it. “No, John,” you snarl, marching up to him. “I’m not asking what you want to do in your little fantasy world where we all believe that there’s nothing wrong with you. I’m asking what’s going on here.”

“Look, we’re still going to go to the Skaal, find whatever the secret is, and take Scratch down. It doesn’t matter how I feel about it.”

“Oh yeah, of course, it doesn’t make an ounce of difference that you’re distracted and not acting like yourself. It doesn’t matter that you’re being even worse at hiding your distress than I normally am and it’s bringing everyone down. Why the fuck would any of that matter in the slightest?”

He huffs and looks away.

“What? Was the sarcasm not clear enough for you?!”

“I’ll be fine, Karkat.”

“No you won’t! You’re just going to bury your emotions because you’re too afraid to deal with whatever’s going on and instead you’ll just fill time with exhausting busywork!”

“I didn’t realize you have a problem with trying to help people,” He growls. His accent is slipping; you must be getting to him. Good.

"I do if it’s gonna fucking kill us!" You grab his shirt "Look scum-for-brains, running ourselves ragged before the fight for the end of the world is stupid, and all you’ll be able to do is kiss your stupid-ass hero complex goodbye as the whole universe curls up and dies!"

"That's exactly why we have to keep going!" He shoves you away. "We need to get this done and get it done quick. If we finish in the next few days, we'll have plenty of time to recover, make repairs, and get everything ready to go."
"Yeah, if! If we don't get ourselves killed on this stupid sub-mission! This isn't even playing with
fire anymore, this is playing with gods and immortal monsters, shit that's older than Dwemer ruins
and this isn't even our fight. So what Scratch gets back to Tamriel? If you’re strong enough to beat
him now, you’ll be strong enough to beat him later. Besides, the Strilalondes could probably
handle him. This fucking screams 'not John's job,' but you're refusing to listen!"

He turns away from you and starts searching through his bag. "Look, if you're scared you don't
have to come with me. I never asked you to."

"Fuck no!" You grab his arm. "I'm not playing that game, Egbert. I told you I'm seeing this
through to the bitter, bloody, horrifically violent end!"

"Yeah, and that's what scares me!" He yanks his arm free from your grasp. "Karkat, you need to
stay safe. If anything happens to you I'd-"

“I knew it! I fucking knew it!” You throw your hands up. “All this time and you still don’t trust
me!”

“It's not like that,” he says with a groan.

“Look, you can phrase it however you damn well please. ‘I don’t want you to get hurt.’ ‘You mean
too much to me.’ ‘I’ll protect you.’ I have read every version of that line there is in more books
than I care to count, but it all just translates to a condescending ‘you can’t take care of yourself!’"

“That is not what that means!” he growls.

“Oh, and what does it mean, then? Go ahead, try to make it not sound patronizing. I fucking dare
you!”

“Yeah, I’m sure you wouldn’t try to stop me if I throw myself at shit that’s like ninety-nine
percent likely to get me killed!”

“Of course I would! John this isn’t about the fact that what we do is dangerous! We both already
fucking know that. This is about the fact that as far as you’re concerned a slight breeze might kill
me!”

“Stop being so dumb!” He snaps, “Like you said, this is gods and immortal monsters. It’s not
bandits or vampires or even giants! I know you can handle those. I know you can take care of
yourself in Skyrim and that’s not nothing. It’s just…” He looks away.

“Figured it out yet? That you can’t say a damn thing that doesn’t simplify down to me being
inherently inferior? So, which part do you dwell on the most? The daedra part, the dragonborn part
or the nobility part?”

“What about the part where I spent fifteen years actively training for this kind of shit?!”

“Oh, age, I didn’t even think about that one!”

“Lorkhan's fucking heart! It’s not about- You can't just-" He throws his hands up and you see a
flame flicker in his palms for a moment. Then he notices and clenches his fists. "No, you know
what, I’m done. I’m not gonna let you take your insecurities and use them to make me look like the
bad guy!"

You sputter, “This isn’t about me!”
He scoffs and crosses his arms. "Okay, sure. You're perfectly happy to keep picking at me, literally corner me when I just wanted to fucking sleep, but Akatosh forbid I say a damn word in my defense!"

"It's not my fault that-"

"That you can't leave me alone for five seconds? I think it kind of is!" He takes a deep breath and pushes past you.

"The fuck do you think you're doing?" You demand.

"I'm going for a walk, okay? I need to chill out and clear my head."

"No! John, if we’re going to keep working together you have to let me in! You have to-"

"I will." He turns back to you. "I promise, promise I will tell you what happened just… not now, okay?"

"Then when?!"

"Soon," he replies flatly. "I don't know. I'm sorry, Karkat. I just need some time."

"Fine." You say, staring at the wall.

He pauses for a moment but then goes, shutting the door gently behind him. You give it about a minute and then head back out yourself. You're not quite dumb enough to follow him, but like hell you're just leaving things as they are. Instead you go to the main tower.

You hate the feeling of floating up the shaft, but this is still all you can really think to do. Neloth is sitting around the table with all four of the Strilalondes, a few books open in front of them. They all look up when you land.

"Please," you say, approaching them slowly "I need you to tell me everything you know about the Corten mountains."

---

SUNDAS 29TH FROSTFALL, 4E202

I CAN’T FUCKING SLEEP. HE’S STILL NOT BACK. NELOTH DIDN’T KNOW SHIT. APPARENTLY THE ONLY INTERESTING THING THAT’S EVER HAPPENED IN THE CORTEN MOUNTAINS WAS A FREAK STORM DURING THE WAR THAT KILLED A WHOLE BUNCH OF ALTMER SOLDIERS, WHERE THERE WAS THIS REALLY EARLY BLIZZARD AND WHILE THAT WAS GOING A WILDFIRE GOT STARTED AND WHAT SHRUBBY FOREST THERE WAS BURNT DOWN. AND PEOPLE WERE ARGUING BACK AND FORTH FOR A WHILE ABOUT IF IT WAS MAGIC OR HOLY OR WHATEVER. LIKE THE GODS SEEMED TO BE AT ALL INTERESTED IN MAKING SURE THE IMPERIALS WON. AND OF COURSE THE ALTMER, THE STRONGEST NATURAL MAGES IN THE WORLD, WERE BEATEN BY HUMANS WHO SOMEHOW CONTROL THE WEATHER.

…WAIT.

JOHN CAN CONTROL THE WEATHER…

IT COULDN’T HAVE BEEN HIM. UNLESS HE’S A TIME TRAVELER OR WAY OLDER THAN HE SAYS HE IS. AND I DON’T THINK
Karkat waited up for you. You had the feeling he would, even if you were really hoping you’d come back to find him all curled up asleep on the bed. You think maybe that was selfish, that it would have been too big of a break for you. He’s sitting up with his journal open and pen in hand. He opens his mouth to speak, and you just sigh closing the door behind you. He grumbles something you can't make out and lies down.

You undress and put your clothes in a neat pile as quietly as you can. After blowing out the candles, you hesitate for a moment. But no, there’s not much else you can do so you slip into bed beside him. He's going to yell at you again. Of course he will. He’s been in here letting his mood fester.

But he doesn't. He just lays there, turned away from you but quiet. It wouldn't feel right to spoon him right now, so you press your back against his. He's warm and solid, his frame familiar against yours. It would be comforting if you weren't waiting for him to explode.

But this time you break first, and the words come spilling out. "I'm sorry, Karkat. I'm sorry I pulled you into Oblivion with me. I'm sorry I've been weird all day. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

He tries to cut you off with a "John, I-" but you keep going.

"I guess you've figured out that the Corten thing is personal. Well, sort of, it's more of a family thing. I wasn't there – fuck – I wouldn't be here if not for Corten, but it's a long story and honestly now I am exhausted. Okay?"

"...Okay."

"And Karkat?"

"Yeah?"

"I do trust you. Stop selling yourself short, alright? I don't think you realize how amazing you really are."

He lets out a dry laugh and rolls over, throwing his arm across your waist. "Yeah, whatever. Save it for the next time you want to get into my pants."

He doesn't believe you. But you're not starting another fight. Not today. For now, you just let him hold you and promise yourself that soon you'll get him to listen.

morndas 30th first seed, 4e202

made it back to the skaal village today. i've been trying to focus on what we're doing, but my mind just keeps wandering back to what hermaeus mora said.

it shouldn’t change anything. revenge is stupid. it’s not like killing scratch will bring anyone back. but i can’t help but think that maybe if he’s dead dad will sleep a little better at night.

really, the worst part of all this is karkat. he wants to know, and he deserves to know. but just because it happened doesn’t mean i want to talk about it. i promised him i would, though.

tomorrow should work, i think. storn's sending us back out. apparently he’s not giving anything up
until we cleanse the other two stones. so karkat and i will be off and alone again. i'd feel better if we do it that way. if nothing else it means the striders won't hear.

TIRDAS, 31ST FIRST SEED, 4E202

WE LEFT AROUND NOON TODAY. WITH GETTING TO SLEEP SO LATE TWO NIGHTS AG THE DAY BEFORE YE BACK AT TEL MITHRYN AND THEN SPENDING YESTERDAY IN A VILLAGE FULL OF HUMANS WE'RE STARTING TO GET BACK ON A NORMAL SCHEDULE. THE STRILALONDES AND THEIR NIGHT SHIFT BULLSHIT CAN SUCK MY GODDAMN BALLS. IF WE'RE TROMPING AROUND THE COUNTRYSIDE WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO FUCKING SEE.

THIS GODS-FORSAKEN ISLAND SEEMS TO BE REALIZING IT'S SPRING. SO IT'S WARMER, WHICH IS KIND OF NICE, BUT AT THE SAME TIME IT MEANS EVERYTHING IN THE NORTH IS A MUDDY MESS. MY BOOTS ARE PROBABLY GOING TO BE BROWNISH GRAY FOREVER. AT LEAST PLACES WHERE THE SNOW STARTED TO MELT AND THEN FROZE AGAIN ARE PRETTY, EVEN IF IT'S TERRIFYING TO WALK UNDER THEM BECAUSE THEY'RE GIANT FROZEN WATERFALLS THAT COULD COLLAPSE AT ANY MINUTE.

BECAUSE OF THE TRUDGING THROUGH MUD SHIT, WE DIDN'T EVEN REACH THE FUCKING WATER STONE TODAY. INSTEAD, WE ACCIDENTALLY WANDERED TOO CLOSE TO SOME DWEMER RUINS AND GOT ATTACKED BY REIKINGS. BY THEN IT WAS ALREADY GETTING LATE, SO WE HAD TO FIGHT OUR WAY PRETTY DEEP INTO THE FUCKING RUINS SO THAT WE'D HAVE SOMEWHERE SAFE TO SET UP CAMP.

AND I KNOW WE SHOULD KEEP GOING, BUT I STUMBLED ACROSS THIS JOURNAL ON A DEAD ADVENTURER. HE KEPT MENTIONING THIS THING CALLED THE ARMOR OF SNOW KINGS THAT'S SUPPOSED TO BE BURIED IN HERE? AND I DON'T LIKE TAKING THESE SIDE TRIPS, BUT...

BUT I DO NEED A NEW SET OF ARMOR. AND THIS CITY LOOKS SMALL. IT SHOULDN'T TAKE US TOO LONG.

I'LL TRY TO SELL JOHN ON IT AFTER DINNER. HE'S USUALLY MORE SUGGESTIBLE ON A FULL STOMACH.

You sit near the fire, watching as John tidies up the worst of the mess. You're about to ask him about going deeper tomorrow, but he's too quick for you.

"So, I guess… I guess now can be soon," he says with a sigh.

"Huh?"

"I said I'd tell you about Corten ‘soon’ a few days ago, so I guess I’m ready for it to be ‘soon’ now. I- I just didn't want to talk where other people might overhear." He stirs the coals of your fire with a long stick.

"Is it top secret or something?" You ask with a snort.

He looks up at you with an eyebrow raised. "Well, yeah."

“Wait, seriously?"
"Most of the work the Emperor makes us do is. Remember the stuff that came out at High Hrothgar?"

“Oh,” you look down. “Right.”

“Yeah. The Emperor keeps us around so we can do stuff like that. Castle Battlehorn isn’t an important fort, and we don’t have super advantageous marriage contracts. Barons that are way more important than us on paper had their land taken and their castles abandoned after the war, but we got to keep ours because everyone knows we’re his highness’s best attack dogs.” He wrinkles his nose and there’s a bit of a harsh curve to his words.

“Is it that bad?”

“Karkat, he told us to wipe Windhelm off the map. And Corten… Corten was a similar situation. There wasn’t a city there – thank Stendarr – but there was only one road that would let the Altmer into the Western part of Cyrodiil.” He pulls the stick from the coals and draws two rows of upside down v’s with a line of stick figures between them. The fat charcoal lines are easily visible on the pale grey flagstones, and he sketches what is presumably a map of the pass. “The main force came up through Valenwood, but some of our spies found out about second army that was going to come through the Colovian Highlands to burn down the farms between Chorrol and the Imperial City and then set up a siege in case the primary force got held up in Skingrad.”

You try to picture a map in your head. You know vaguely where most of those things are but… Oh, whatever. The details probably don’t matter. “So… the second army would have been the one your family was fighting, right?”

“Right.” He gives you a small smile then turns back to the drawing. “Okay, so these are hills and this is the Aldmeri army. So you’re vastly outnumbered, but the army is mostly regular soldiers. I mean, they’re Altmer, so they can do some magic, but most of them aren’t mages. You want to do as much damage as possible and back out. What do you do?”

You think for a moment. Is this some kind of trick question? Why is he even bothering to ask? But he’s looking at you earnestly so you give it your best shot. "Attack from behind I guess?"

"Close! If it were a smaller group that would work. But no, if it’s like this you go through the middle." he scratches out the stick figures near the middle of the line. "The main reason is that’s where an army usually keeps their mages so they’re theoretically better protected. In a group that big, they usually also keep a commander near the back to make sure no one runs away too, and flanks are almost as weak as the back. So you hit that, and preferably make a lot of light and fire so the foot soldiers panic. By the time they can draw their weapons and get into a line you can be back up the hill and pick a different spot to pass through, starting the whole thing over.”


“Apparently it usually works well. This time it didn’t. I mean it started fine. Nanna was leading a force of 24 battlemages, and they were all spread out on either side so that they could do multiple attacks right after the other. Aunt Jean had a big old invisibility spell going so no one could see where they were and then dad and Uncle Joel summoned a massive ice storm. From what Dad said their first charge went really well. And once they were out the other half of the group went down to take over."

He quickly draws a few more figures standing on the point of the V’s. “But it turns out the Thalmor somehow knew we were going to do that. So they set up an ambush for the ambush. They had their own invisibility spells going, and as soon as our guys revealed their positions they got
"Oh," you say.

"Yeah. Oh." He sighs and puts the stick down. "Dad's not sure how many of them there actually were, but he swears it had to have been hundreds. Like at least on his side he was outnumbered more than ten to one by elite Thalmor agents. It was a disaster. Of the 24 Egberts that went in, only seven managed to get out of that initial fight."

You inhale sharply. "There used to be that many of you?"

"Yeah, used to being the key word. Nana’s little brother and his entire line were wiped out. I had another aunt and she and her family were killed. One of the kids was only sixteen, she wasn’t even really finished training yet."

"Fucking Talos…"

"And that would have been bad enough, but it wasn't over yet. Dad won’t even talk about the next part, but from what I’ve picked up from everyone else they escaped and regrouped in a house not far away. Nanna treated everyone’s injuries as well as she could, but my uncle's leg had been burnt too badly for her to even start to fix and there were a few other pretty serious injuries. Aunt Jean did everything she could to hide the shack, but the Thalmor still found them in a little over an hour."

"But at this point- fuck this is gonna sound awful, but most of those people had to live for you and your cousins to be here."

John shrugs. "I mean, you’re not wrong. Obviously Dad and Joel and Jean made it because you know they’re still alive, and Jean’s still married to her same husband. Thankfully Nanna was alright too. But my dad's first wife and one of their kids… they made it in but not back out."

He runs his fingers through his hair and continues his story. "Honestly, Nanna's probably the only reason anyone else held it together. She got everyone out of that house, kept them going, made sure that the Thalmor never quite caught up. Eventually they made it back to the castle, but the Thalmor were still chasing them. Nanna told everyone in the town to go hide the woods, and most of them agreed, even if a few of them were determined to stay and help fight. By the time the Thalmor showed up – about sixty or seventy of them – everything was closed up and the whole town was ready to basically make its last stand."

"But you won?"

He shakes his head silently. "There's a secret chamber under the castle. Not sure what it used to be, but after Sheogorath decided he was done being in Tamriel his kids – so my great grandparents – turned it into a shrine, complete with a little gate item linking it to the Shivering Isles. And when your soul leaves your body it takes any magic traces with it. So everyone hid except for Nanna."

"Why did she stay?"

"Because her plan was to convince the Thalmor everyone else was actually dead. So, she drew the fight out, making sure that the castle itself took heavy damage, so maybe they'd think everyone had died from falling rocks or wounds or something. She knew she couldn't hold them off, and eventually they did get in. But then Nanna dropped a full Oblivion gate on their heads."

You blink. "Wait, you mean like the kind from the Crisis?"
"Exactly like that," he replies.

"That's a thing you can do?!!" you demand. Because if John can do that, maybe when it comes to actually fighting Alduin you can-

He makes an uncertain sound. "Well… Uh… Let’s just say that spell is castable the way poison is eatable. Like it only works once."

"I get it," you say. Well there goes that plan.

"But the gate stayed there long enough to let some stupidly powerful Daedra through: tons of foot soldiers and the two gatekeepers, which are basically giant, horrifying, magic resistant sacks of dead flesh. A couple of the Thalmor, probably the few that were old enough to remember the Oblivion Crisis, kept it together, but everyone else was killed or ran away. And the Daedra let them go, partially because they physically couldn’t chase them down, but also so that the survivors could go tell the Aldmeri Dominion that Castle Battlehorn had been sacked and the Egbert family was dead."

You swallow. "Well, I guess that revenge thing makes sense now."

"I mean yes, but..." He looks over at the remains of the fire. "It was a war. It’s not like Thalmor grow out of the ground or fall from the sky or whatever; they have to have family too. But still, it broke Dad. Like my aunt and uncle lost siblings and cousins, but dad-“ He pauses for a moment. "You know he’s old, right? Like I told you he’s turning 70 this year?"

"I think you’d mentioned that before, yeah."

"So he got married at 20 and had four kids before he was 30. I didn’t know any of that until I met them in Oblivion. No one can even bear to mention it. He’s got to blame himself because I can’t even convince him to go see them." He crosses his arms and looks away. "So yeah, there’s a part of me that thinks revenge would be great, that thinks maybe even if it can’t bring them back that it’ll help my dad.

"But at the same time, I know that if it weren’t for Corten and if it weren’t for the fact that they died I wouldn’t exist. Jane wouldn’t exist. Even if I was still born somehow, I probably wouldn’t be as close to Jane because Jean wouldn’t have been gone working at the academy in the Imperial City. Everything that my family’s done in the past thirty years has been trying to rebuild what we lost in the war, and even though I don’t like to think about it I know that includes me and my cousins and just about everything we’ve ever cared about."

"So all that is going on in the background, and now I'm supposed to kill the guy who set it all up.” There are tears welling up in his eyes as he stares down at the floor. “The guy who killed a whole bunch of people with my same powers but decades more experience. Someone who, as it turns out, is also a dragonborn and also has daedric magic, oh and by the way, is thousands of years old and probably omniscient. And I'm supposed to fight him by myself."

"No you're not," you say. You throw your arms around his shoulders and pull him close. "We're doing this together."

He hesitates but then wraps his arms around you. "I-I'm confused," he admits, voice thick with emotion. "I don't know what to think or what to feel or what to do, but I'm scared."

"It's okay," you whisper, running your hand soothingly down his back. "I'm here."

"I love you," he croaks out. "Gods, Karkat, you're so fucking amazing."
"I love you too." You keep him close, letting him take whatever he can from you. Just this once, you get to be his comfort.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure i'm 100% happy with this, but tbh im not 100% happy with much of anything right now.
Comments, especially constructive criticism, are always appreciated. Thanks, guys.
Karkat stayed close to you all night, petting your hair and holding you close and reassuring you. The two of you fell asleep stuffed in the same bedroll, and even though he woke up before you for once he stayed curled up against your chest.

You want to lie there forever, running your fingers absentmindedly through his hair.

“I love you so much,” you murmur. “Seriously, Karkat, you’re the best.”

He hums and nuzzles you. “Hey John?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you do something for me?”

You smile. “Anything.”

“I want to explore the rest of these ruins.” He looks up at you earnestly.

“Oh! I wasn’t expecting that but… Today’s the first right?” You nibble on your lower lip.

“Yeah.”

You think it over for a moment. Time is kind of fucking important right now, but you had to go a long way into these ruins to get out of the cold and past the reiklings. Plus you can hear the sounds of spinning blades coming from the other room. So it seems like the traps reset themselves overnight, and given the way the room was configured backing out might not be that easy. You sigh. “I think we can take one day.”

He scuttles up your body and kisses you. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

You give his hair one more stroke before he wiggles free of the bedroll to start getting ready.

So, of course, the ruins are way bigger and more complicated than you were banking on. There aren’t too many enemies, but soon you enter this room filled with contraptions you’ll never understand, filled with spinning cogs, each the size of a house. Then it turns out you have to try to figure out how the fuck this thing works and turn the boiler back on so you can reach the damn treasure room.

The two of you fuck it up a couple of times and, of course, this mechanism is trapped too. So you hack away at the dwarven spiders while Karkat keeps taking shots at the weird spinny lock thingies.

Gods, you’re starting to hate dwarven ruins as much as you used to hate aylied ones. At least Karkat’s not as much of an asshole as teenage Jake was.
But eventually Karkat gets the thing going and you're allowed to proceed. You make your way into a big dramatic final room, where two centurions stand at the ready. In the middle of the room there's a huge platform with three empty pedestals. And as far as you can see there's no way out. Great.

You summon your armor onto Karkat and cast ebonyskin on yourself. This won't be easy.

Karkat pushes the helmet back a little and then lines up a shot. He hits one of the centurions in the face, but it barely seems to care. You summon a pair of atronachs and they immediately begin throwing fireballs at the machines. The centurions charge forward, unperturbed.

They're getting too close too fast. Karkat drops his bow, you summon your hammer, and you both get ready. One centurion launches a plume of steam at you, and you narrowly avoid it. You swing your hammer at the thing's knee and it stumbles, falling sideways, towards Karkat.

"Watch out!" You cry.

Karkat sees and tries to get back, but he's not quite quick enough. He falls, pinned beneath an angry and still very dangerous centurion. the other one's standing right next to him. It lifts an arm and lines up a strike. You sprint over and bash the standing centurion, drawing its attention away from Karkat.

Out of the corner of your eye, you can see him desperately trying to pull himself free, but the centurion's dented frame is caging his leg in. Then he turns to you.

"John!" He calls. "Banish your armor!"

"What? Are you crazy?!" The centurion swings a heavy arm at you, and can barely hold it back, even with all your magically enhanced strength.

"Just do it!"

And you do. You banish the armor and Karkat pulls himself free. In the blink of an eye, he leaps onto the standing centurion's back and plunges his arm into the gap between its head and torso. The machine reaches for him, but it's too slow. The light in its eyes goes out and it falls to the ground as Karkat comes away with its core in his hand. The one on the ground makes a noise like it's about to shoot steam at you, and you bring Vrillyhoo down, crushing its head.

"Are you okay?" You ask, prying your hammer out of the machine's twisted face.

"I'm fine." He says between breaths. "Be better when I get some lighter armor, though." He pulls your tunic off and throws it at you. "I'm sorry, John. I know you worry, but I can't move in that shit."

You want to object. He can't run around with no protection at all! But it can't be that much further until the end of the dungeon. And even if the armor can deflect some hits, if he can't dodge the really major ones... You look back down at the shirt in your hands. Maybe it's for the best. You put your armor back on.

By the time you've finished, Karkat is almost half way up the stairs. Well, no reason for you to go then. He makes it to the platform and begins examining the pillars. He takes the core in his hands and places it atop one of them. The ground shakes and lifts you.

You can see that there's another room ahead, but there's still a twenty-foot ledge between you and it.
"Hey John!" Karkat yells.

"What?"

"Throw me the other centurion's core!"

"You got it!" you call. Then you bend down and get to work. It takes you a lot longer than it did Karkat to dig through the machine's metal guts, but eventually, after pulling out a bunch of springs and cogs, you manage to wrestle the core free. You toss it up towards Karkat, who catches it and places it in another one of the pillars. Small sections of the floor lift up, creating stairs to the next room.

"Nice!" You pump your fist in the air.

Karkat rolls his eyes and drops down from the ledge above. "Sometimes I seriously can't with you."

"Come on! We're doing this to get you new armor, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah, I remember." He shoulder checks you on his way past to get towards the stairs.

You follow, climb this last set of stairs and, well, there it is.

A mannequin stands behind golden bars, its armor gleaming harshly in a beam of white light shining down from above. The mannequin is just made of plain stone, but you can't identify what material the armor is made of. The joints look elven, but instead of a golden feather motif, it looks it’s made of silvery material so pale it’s almost white, with ornamentation clearly inspired by bats. And unlike the other elven armor you seen, this one's painted. Crimson knot-like designs flow across the torso, and on the pauldrons the ribbons of color end in the familiar curves of a sideways 69. And it looks like it’s just about Karkat’s size.

He just stares for a moment and then jumps forward to pick the lock. There’s a click and the door swings open without so much as a whisper of a creak. Karkat climbs up onto the pedestal and as he stands before it you realize that armor isn’t just about his size; it’s exactly his size. You can see his hands shaking slightly as he reaches for the helmet. He puts it on and turns back to you and your heart skips a beat. There’s something about the color and the shape and how it frames his face that’s beautifully striking. Even with just the helmet on he looks like he's ready to take on just about anything.

“What do you think?” He asks.

You wet your lips, uncertain of exactly what to say. The trained part of your brain wants to ask what it's made of, how it feels, how much of a beating it could take. The part that always goes soft and squishy when you look at him wants you to do your damndest to come up with something sweet and poetic, even though every other ounce of you knows it would fail. And unsurprisingly, the far less subtle part of you just wants to come on to him and is trying to figure out the optimal amount of armor and/or clothing he should be allowed to keep for maximum sexy. Somehow you manage to scramble the three together into something vaguely coherent. “Well, I mean, if it feels as good as it looks I think we’ll be fine.”

He snorts and turns back to the mannequin, undoing the clasps on the rest of the armor. “You’re such a dork.”

“Yeah, but I’m your dork.”
You follow him into the treasure room. He’s got a lovely pink blush on his cheeks and he refuses to make eye contact. D’aaw.

“You gonna help me?” he snaps.

“Sure,” you reply with a little laugh.

You start undoing the rest of the armor. It comes apart just like elven armor does, but the pieces are even lighter in your hands. Then you start helping him try it on. Each piece slides into place effortlessly. You don’t even have to adjust anything. It’s almost creepy, but it looks so freakin’ badass and gorgeous you don’t even really care. You wonder how the two of you would look together, with him fitted out in white while your armor's so dark it's almost black. You bet it’s cool. Yeah, it’s gotta be pretty cool.

And he seems happier now. He stands a little taller, looks a bit more at ease. And as nice as it was seeing him look so small in your things, the confidence is hot in a whole new way.

"Yeah," he says. "I think I’m keeping this."

You can't help but agree.

—

midad 1st rain's hand, 4e202

i know we said we wouldn't, but we wound up spending a lot of time in those dwarven ruins. it looked so small from the surface, but it took us more than half the day to get through! karkat found some armor, though, so maybe it's worth it.

and either it was shorter than we thought or we started earlier than we thought, because it was only about noon when we got out so we got to keep going. when we made it to the water stone karkat was practically jumping up and down he was so excited to be able to fight again. he may have been trying to play it cool, but come on it's karkat. gods it was adorable. and he's picking up on using the new armor pretty quick. he's obviously not quite used to it yet, but he's back to being fast and precise and he actually got the kill on the big fish thing. as soon as it showed up he cut up the tendons in its legs and then stabbed it in the face. it! was! awesome! and he got so excited and happy and i know i said this already but he's just so cute!

and since we finished that so quick, we got to clear out the earth stone a little further south too (and karkat was adorable again, hehe), but by the time we made it back to raven rock it was the middle of the night. right now we're just crashing in that abandoned building the strilalondes were renting. karkat's already passed out, but i was a little too wound up to sleep so i started writing. tomorrow we'll pick up supplies and then head back to the village. and then, i guess, whatever happens happens.

—

Most of the next day goes well. Nothing bothers you on your way back north, and the weather stays clear until you're almost all the way to the Skaal village. You’re almost a little bit put out. You wanted to fight more in your new armor, dammit! You tell that to John and he laughs. Well, at least you have something to pull him out of his head. He's been more like himself since he told you his story, but you can tell he's still a little bit worried.

The dome of magic light still surrounds the village. You pass through it easily and find Storn. He’s still kneeling outside his house, chanting a prayer over and over in ancient Nordic.

"You have returned," he says. "I sense that you have succeeded in cleansing the stones."
"Yeah," John says. "Um, so what happens now?"

He sighs and gets to his feet. "Our songs and prophesies tell of the day when we will lose this secret, when Herma Mora will gain access to this knowledge. I believe that time has come."

"Father, are you sure?" Frea asks.

He gives her a sad look. "If Miraak succeeds, it will mean the end of our people. Giving Herma Mora this secret is an acceptable loss. Dragonborn, please hand the tome to me."

John nods and pulls the Black Book from his bag. "Here."

"Take care of the village, my daughter," he says. He kisses her forehead and then opens the book.

He goes still for a moment, and then visibly staggers. Instead of the pale green words that had encircled you, thick black tentacles come out of the book. They wrap around storn's neck and chest, and one spears him through the mouth.

"What the fuck?!" You shout, drawing your sickles.

Hermaeus Mora's voice fills the air, echoing off the buildings and making your stomach churn. "If you cooperate, human, it will be over more quickly. Be still, let me take what I need from your mind."

"Father!" Frea shouts.

"What are you doing?!" John demands.

"Taking my secrets." He Daedra replies calmly, as though he were explaining to a child how to peel a potato. "He refused to lower the barriers in his mind, so I have no choice but to take his knowledge by force." The tentacles withdraw, and Storn looks at you. His eyes glow green and he has strange double pupils. He smiles unevenly, one corner of his mouth far higher than the other.

"Well, Dragonborn," he says in Hermaeus Mora's voice, "you have fulfilled your end of the bargain. And now I shall do my part, as benefits a prince of Oblivion." He makes a jerky motion with one arm.

John gives him a confused look. "Dov?" He asks.

"Indeed. Miraak learned this shout to control the creatures that were once his masters. You will need to do the same to defeat him. I suppose you likely knew that word already, but now that you understand it as he does, I hope you use it well." He cocks his head at a nearly impossible angle, "So which will triumph? The first dragonborn or the last? The one who claims incredible daedric power through devotion or birthright? Either way, it will be a battle worth watching. I shall see you in my realm. This flesh suit is most... uncomfortable."

The light fades from Storn's eyes, leaving them blank and glassy, and he collapses.

Frea throws herself over him, sobbing.

"Frea," John asks, "are you-"

"Just go!" she says. "Father died for you to defeat this demon. Do not let it have been in vain."

"Shouldn't we wait, though?" you ask. "I mean, we've been walking for hours."
"It'll be fine," John says. "Our bodies might be a little tired, but it's not like they're coming with us."

You look at him uncertainly. You don't want to do this fight at anything less than full power. But, then again, he probably knows more about Oblivion instinctively than you could learn in a hundred years. You nod and take a deep breath to ground yourself.

"Okay," you say, "I trust you." You offer him your hand. He smiles, takes it, and opens the book.

This time you don't even stumble as you materialize in Apocrypha. It's probably just because you're holding onto John, but you'd like to think that maybe you're getting used to this. A wide flat area spreads out in front of you, broken up in some places by towering stacks of books. A few of the rag-covered monsters float back and forth between you and the other side of the platform.

They turn to look at you and begin drifting forward.

"You ready?" John asks. He's way perkier than he was a minute before, but you guess you can deal with that. You'd rather see him this way than depressed.

"Always," you reply, drawing your sickles.

He laughs, far too light and carefree for the situation, and summons his hammer. "After you, then."

You charge forward and he bounds after you.

The two of you strike down Daedra left and right. None of them stand a snowflake's chance in The Deadlands. To be fair, John's still getting most of the kills, but you think you're keeping up pretty well for someone who's only been in Oblivion twice before and doesn't have two sets of stupid broken god powers.

Moving ahead like this, you can almost forget the green sky and the endless ocean of muck beneath you and it begins to feel a little bit like any other dungeon. Sure, the switches are glowing orbs instead of levers, and you have no fucking idea why the labyrinth-like tunnels move the way they do. You have no idea when it'll end, but you have to be making progress, right? Every time you find a Black Book, one of you touches it and then it spits you out into a whole new part of the plane and there's always new daedra to fight, new special books to collect that change something so you can progress further. And further. …And further.

This plane can't go on forever, can it? Or maybe it can. You feel like this is too easy. And with the unchanging light you have no idea how long you've been running around. John was right, you're not getting tired. Maybe instead of just trying to disorient and distract you Scratch was just planning to keep you trapped here for all eternity, not realizing you're going in a big giant circle? No, there are limits to Oblivion. There have to be. If nothing else, if this takes too long John will just burn his way through to wherever the fuck Scratch is hiding. Whenever he gets too close to a wall you can smell smoke and, even if you couldn't, books are pretty flammable compared to dwemer and Nordic ruins. With that assurance in your heart, you keep going.

Then you appear on a floating platform, supported by several membranous bridges. In the middle is a massive tentacle statue, reaching up towards the Eye of Magnus.

"How the fuck did he get that in here?" you demand.

John shrugs. "Better question, how do we get it down?"

Like it heard him, the stone structure comes to life. The tentacles smooth themselves downward,
bringing the Eye of Magnus with them. The sphere rotates, and through one of the cracks you see a Black Book floating inside of it.

"Well that was fucking easy," you say.

John squints at it. "Hang on a sec."

"What?"

"There's something weird about this…" He reaches out towards the eye and the entire thing visibly ripples. He draws back and gives it his unintentional little confused pout. "Okay, I change my mind. The better question is actually how the fuck he got this in here."

"What do you mean?"

"It's called the Eye of Magnus, and it looks like that's not just a title. Like, I wasn't sure back in Skyrim, but thing is totally an aedric artifact. But somehow it's here. I mean, you can't just take something from Aetherius and throw it in Oblivion, they're like total opposites. Is he trying to destroy it or something? But what would he get out of that?"

"I donno. But what are we gonna do with it? If the Book is inside…"

"Shit," John says with a frown, “He is trying to break it. Or get me to break it. But I have no idea what that would do. Do you know what that would do?” He gasps. “Wait, Karkat, I think you might able to do something!"

"Huh? Why me?"

He grabs your shoulders, grinning from ear to ear. "Because I don’t think he knows you're here!"

"Isn't he supposed to be omniscient or something?"

“Yeah, but when he talked to Rose he said I'd be coming here next, but he didn't mention you or Neloth. And even Hermaeus Mora didn't know what was going on until he was right in front of us, and Princes basically are their realms.” His face falls and he lets you go, turning back to the orb. “Wait, this is how he did it. This is how he did it, Karkat!"

"Did what?"

"That's how Scratch tracked us! He can't see us!"

"I'm pretty sure he's seen you, John."

"No, not with his eyes, with his magic!" He grabs you again. "Of course he was able to follow Nana and the others; it's like looking at a piece of cloth with a big old hole in it! And that's why everyone else managed to hide in Oblivion! I can't believe I figured it out! This is awesome! But honestly, that doesn’t really matter right now. What does matter is that your soul is neutral here. Heck, if you can tap into a little bit of magic you should be able to make the Eye more stable!"

"I'm not a mage…" You say, looking at it uncertainly.

"No, but you are an elf." His eyes are so bright, and he's looking at you with so much hope… You take a deep breath. Azura, you’re such a sucker. "Alright."

He lets you go, and you take a few steps forward. Slowly, Karkat, you think, carefully... Please,
please Akatosh let this work. You place your hand on the sphere.

It's slightly warm under your gauntlet, but nothing happens.

You look at John. "Any other ideas?"

He bites his lip. "I don't know. I would have thought that would have done something…"

"I'm as much of a Nord as I am a Dunmer," You mutter, pulling away. "I guess that's just not enough."

"Come on," he says, "You've gotta try something else. You've got to have picked up a spell or two at some point, right?"

"No! Well, maybe… it's not really magic, but… Take a step back."

He smiles and does as you ask. You take a deep breath and close your eyes. Even if you're mixed, even if your blood's weak, you can do this. The fire's buried deep in you and it usually only comes out when you panic, but it's still there. It's always there. You focus on that feeling, the strength and the anger, and you pull. When you open your eyes again your body's cloaked in flames. You touch the Eye again, and this time it begins to open.

"Yes! Good job, Karkat!" He actually jumps into the air like a little kid.

You're basically required to smile at the massive idiot, but then you see it. A piece of the stone floats right next to John. He shifts a little bit and his fingers brush its surface. That piece turns to ash and falls to the ground. Nearby pieces of stone begin to deteriorate, and then those next to them follow.

"…Oops," John says, calling up his armor.

Then the light that had once been contained explodes outwards.

Even with Ancestor's Wrath on your skin, the heat is almost unbearable.

Shit, oh John, shit shit shit…

You start falling. When the light fades you glance around desperately. John is falling next to you, eyes closed. His armor fades and what you can see of his skin is completely black. Oh no… no, this can't be happening. You reach out and touch him. His eyes burst open and he inhales sharply.

Then the air beneath you starts pressing up, slowing your fall. You finally stop about three feet above a wide membrane-platform. Then you drop the last few feet and land right on your ass. The membrane flexes under your weight, but you're okay.

John stumbles and falls to the ground, panting heavily.

"Are you okay?!" You demand, scrambling over to him.

"Well," he says, his complexion fading back to the softer, warmer brown and regaining it's metaphorical and literal glow. "I'm not dead. But ebonyflesh and madness armor and that still hurt like a motherfucker. Ugh, just remind me not to try to lift both of us with wind magic again."

You're so relieved that you can't help but laugh, slumping down on the ground next to him. "Don't worry. If you try it I'll be sure to bitch at you until you stop."
"Heh, I love you so much, man. Just give me a minute to catch my breath and then we'll keep moving."

"Let's hope he gave us somewhere to keep moving to," you reply, looking around.

There are a few pillars of books on this little island and you see more platforms in the distance, but you don't see a path forward. But… there is a big old word wall just across the way. Or you think it's a word wall, anyway. It's a little weird with a main surface like parchment covered in ever-changing ink characters and a strange crescent design on the top, but the script looks familiar enough.

Well, here's hoping that'll do something.

Good to his word, John gets to his feet after around a minute. He even offers a hand to help you up like you were the one who'd needed the break. You roll your eyes but take it and don't let him go even after you’re standing. The feeling might be muted through your gauntlet, but you still like the having his hand in yours. The ground just sinks ever so slightly under your weight with each step you take, making a little squeaking noise that seems to echo across the otherwise silent island. At least nothing tries to murder you as you walk across the membrane.

John approaches the wall and, as usual, you don't see or feel a damn thing, even as his eyes glaze over and he goes into an almost-trace like state. But because you're still alert, you can hear the loud, strained roar. A strange dragon flies over the wall, its muzzle stunted and round like the images on the walls in the temple. You draw your sickles, but John puts a hand on your shoulder. You're about to ask him politely what the fuck he's thinking when he looks up at the creature and shouts.

The dragon lands in front of the two of you. You tense, but don't move. If John's still confident about dragon bullshit, you're inclined to trust him. And it looks like today is not the day that blind faith gets you killed, because instead of roaring or shooting fire the dragon lowers its head to the ground submissively.

"So," it says, blinking slowly, "You are the Dovahkiin who will be challenging Miraak after all this time."

"Yep!" he says. "Prolly kind of a silly question, but did it work?"

"The 'it' in question being your fresh thu'um overpowering his older one? Indeed."

"You don't want to fight?" you ask disbelievingly.

The dragon turns one massive eye to you. "Not now. My brothers and I have been under Miraak's control for millennia. It will be nice to watch him burn. And even were that not the case, this one's thu'um was strong enough to break Miraak's, therefore he could simply recast the spell and I would again be mindless. And that makes my choice for me."

"I guest this makes sense," you concede.

"Good. Climb upon my back, mortals, and I shall take you to him."

"I don't trust this," you say. "He's probably going to just shake us off into the ocean."

"Even if I do, what choice do you have?" he asks. "Do you see any other way off this island?"

John looks over to you. "I mean, yeah, we’re probably walking into a trap, but…"
“But it’s a damned if we do damned if we don’t,” you finish, crossing your arms.

“Yeah. Karkat, I think you-“

“I’m not staying here on this slime pancake!” you growl.

“I know. I wasn’t gonna ask you to. I just think you should take one of those invisibility potions we never use once we get close. Maybe if we’re lucky if you do that and stick close he won’t notice you. Like, let me take the first few hits and then see if you can find an opening.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

“I’m glad,” he says with a smile.

“You don’t have to look so fucking smug about it, asshole,” you grumble, clambering up onto the dragon.

“Sorry,” he says, in a sing-songy voice that makes it clear he’s not sorry at all.

He slips in behind you and wraps his arms around your waist.

“You will want to hold on tightly, mortals,” The dragon says.

You want to ask him "Onto what?" but then he's spreading his wings. You screech but instinctively grab one of the spikes on his neck. John laughs in your ear and holds you a little more tightly.

"Gods, you're such a dick."

"I love you too," he says, putting his head on your shoulder.

You roll your eyes, but don’t complain. Not when you can hear a little warble of worry and sadness in his voice, not when you know he's too busy worrying that even if this isn't the right time, it might be the only one left. Even if he really ought to be used to that by now.

It's hard to adjust to riding the dragon. There's a steady rise and fall, which would almost be like the rhythm of riding a horse if the horse were giant and each stride lifted or dropped you like three feet. If you don't land soon you think you're gonna be sick.

Thankfully, in a matter of minutes the dragon turns its head back to you and says, "We are approaching the place where Miraak waits."

"Really?" You say. "Never would have guessed. It's not like we're heading straight for a pillar about a mile up in the air with like three hundred dragons circling around it!"

"Did you not have something you were meant to do, elf?" The dragon asks. You briefly wonder if flicking a transparent eyelid is the dragon equivalent of eye-rolling. With the way this one just did it, it feels like a distinct possibility.

"I know, I know." You fumble through your pouches, but you manage to get the right bottle before you get too close. The potion tastes like sawdust and overripe fruit, but when you look down you can't see your body, so you'll take it. John lets go of you and instead puts his hands just above yours on the dragon's spike.

You just hope the spell will last long enough.

With a few more flaps of its wings the dragon is up above the edge of the massive pillar. Scratch
stands beside a pool of muck, stance wide and confident. You can't see his eyes behind his mask, but you can feel his gaze following the dragon as it circles to land.

"It's okay," you whisper over your shoulder, "I've got you. I'm here."

He makes a soft, low affirmative noise.

When the dragon lands he lets go. You slide off the far side and take a few steps back, sticking close to the edge of the platform. So far, it looks like he's keeping his eyes on John. Or at least his head is facing like he is.

"Welcome, child," Scratch says, brandishing his staff, "to the summit of Apocrypha."

"Yeah," John hops off the dragon's back and summons his armor and hammer. "Your little trick with the eye of Magnus didn't work."

"Oh?" he asks. "Are you certain of that?"

John smirks. "Well, I made it here, didn't I?"

"Yes, but to do so..." he holds out his hand and it sparks wildly with magic. "You released the energy trapped within the Eye of Magnus. And all of that energy was taken up by this realm, and so by me. Furthermore, the blast injured you, and whatever you did to save yourself must have taken quite a drain."

You press yourself next to a stone pillar. So far so good, he still seems to be completely focused on John.

"So what?" John asks. "You didn't think you could take me otherwise?"

Scratch chuckles. "I must admit, as a son of Sheogorath you are an unknown variable. I despise gambling, but if I must take part I choose to hedge my bets. That is why I lured you here with the cultists and the Eye of Magnus, with Rose's lust for knowledge and your inability to say no to a friend. I did not know if either alone would draw you in, and I was well aware that leaving you alone on Nirn to prepare would have been a mistake. Had I done so, and your cohorts might have been able to defeat my master. However, now that you are here, you are alone and subject to me at my full power. I shall take your soul, just as I took those of many dragonborns before you. Using your Daedric magic I shall escape this horrid realm to rejoin my master. Though perhaps before I take my place at his side I shall allow myself a brief detour to finish what I started thirty years ago."

John growls and summons his hammer.

"Oh, did I touch a nerve? Does it bother you, imagining me using your own powers to exterminate the rest of your clan?"

"Enough!" John throws a ball of chaos magic forward. Scratch calmly sidesteps it, and it goes on to turn one of the far pillars into a pile of cheese wheels.

"Will you kindly refrain from doing that?" Hermaeus Mora demands, appearing in the sky without any of the theatrics he used the last time he appeared. "I offered you a quite favorable deal, princeling, and all you have done since you arrived is damage my realm."

"Um, sorry?" John looks up at him uncertainly. "Hey, if he wants to betray you, why are you just floating there? Shouldn't you, like, kill him or something?"
"Perhaps, but as I told you before, this will be an interesting fight, and one certainly worth watching."

"Of course, I am not one to offend a god, even now," Scratch says. "The least I can offer him is a good show before I tear my way out of this prison." He walks to the middle of the platform, the black muck at the center barely rippling under his feet. He turns to the sky and shouts, and a dragon lands on one of the arches at the edge of the platform.

John turns to the dragon and starts rushing towards it, but then Scratch shouts again and pulls the Dragon's soul right from its body. He inhales deeply and then sighs pleasantly. His mask glows.

"Wonderful." He lifts his staff and holds it defensively. "Let's begin then, shall we?"

John summons an atronach and rushes forward.

You have to hand it to him, as insufferable as he might be, Scratch does seem to be one hell of a mage. He's shooting fire and lightning and caustic black shit often and accurately enough that John can't get close, which means you can't either. You consider using your sneak attack to shoot him with the sharpest arrow you have, but if he's anything like John that won't be enough to take him down. Besides, he's moving too quickly for you to get a clear shot.

So you just stand there, twiddling your fucking thumbs, while your partner is fighting for his life. Great.

Eventually John manages to duck under a fireball and get close enough to land a hit on Scratch's side with the hammer. The elf staggers backwards, gripping his chest. His other arm hangs at an odd angle. This is it! Your chance to-

He vanishes in a puff of black smoke and reappears in the center of the platform. He shouts and another dragon descends from above. You and John both and run forward, but he's too fast. He strips the second dragon's soul from its body and his arm pops back into place.

Then he turns and gets John right in the chest with some of the black shit. John staggers back, his armor smoking as the gunk eats away at his cuirass. He banishes the piece and resummons it whole, but that gives Scratch the time to regain his distance and the fight begins again.

But this time John is definitely getting tired. He still wards and dodges, but his lightning and fireballs are missing their earlier pep. And there's dozens of dragons circling above, so the next time he gets an advantage Scratch will just call down another, won't he?

You keep more of an eye on him and John than where you're going, so you trip over one of the dead dragons' wing bones before you catch yourself. Wait, both this one and the other one came down on the stone arches didn't they? There's one empty one left.

The next time Scratch gets hurt, he's going to call a third dragon there. You sneak closer to the gunk, position yourself opposite the empty arch.

But, fuck, you hope John will land a hit soon because the invisibility is wearing off. If you look down you can just see the faintest outline of your body, more transparent than truly invisible now. Maybe even more importantly, John's starting to lose. He's got to be almost, if not completely, out of magicka. There are no more fireballs, no more lightning strikes. All he sends out is the occasional orb of chaos magic, and even those have slowed down. But Scratch isn't doing much better. His aim is off, and he's relying more and more on his staff. If John can just get a little bit closer…
And then, thank *everything* he does. He dodges a fireball and keeps running forward, trying to swing down on Scratch's head. The asshole *just* manages to move far enough that the hit misses his skull, but that doesn't stop some awful crunching sounds when the hammer meets his shoulder.

When he goes immaterial you get ready. He returns to the middle lifting one arm and calling out for the last dragon.

And that's when you strike. Just as you become visible you reach forward and run both sickles around his throat.

"Let's see you shout now!" you cry.

Scratch turns to you, green eyes burning behind his mask, even as blood pours down the front of his robes. He gathers the energy for some spell in his hand, but John's too quick. This time, he manages to land that headshot. Scratch's body crumbles to the ground and begins to burn.

"Well that's weird," you say.

"Something's not right," John says, narrowing his eyes "Something's-"

Then a wispy white light begins radiating out of Scratch's body. It turns and starts heading straight for John. You try to get between it and him, but the light just moves around you and spears John straight in the chest.

He gasps, clutching at himself.

"John?! What's happening?!"

He falls to his knees, armor dissipating. His glow has faded, making him look pale and washed out. "I-I donno. I feel like I'm gonna be sick…"

And he's right. But what he coughs up is some kind of thick black sludge. Choked sounds of pain force themselves out and his arms shake, but you can't do a damn thing other than sit there and stroke his spine gently as he keeps throwing up more and more of the substance. If he would stop you could get some potion into him, but like this…

"It's alright, John," you say, "You're gonna be okay." Even though you have no idea what's going on. Even if no one *could* have any idea what's going on except for maybe-

Hermaeus Mora watches above you, he doesn't make a noise or express any kind of emotion. His dozens of eyes just stay fixed on the two of you, blinking slowly at all different times.

John stops retching and looks up at you. His blue eyes flash green and red and black. "I'm tired." he says, his voice distorted.

"No! Don't go to sleep, John! Don't-"

But it's too late. He closes his eyes and slumps over. You pull him close. He's still breathing, but it's stuttering and shallow. You've got to have a potion, something that can help him. But you have no idea what's wrong, so what if you give him the wrong thing? Would that be better or worse than nothing? What if-

"Well, that was certainly something," Hermaeus Mora says, cutting off your internal panic. "Well done to you both in winning the first fight. I mean, with how Miraak was attempting to stack the deck I was uncertain you'd be successful, though I will say with two of you your odds were quite
good. But, oh dear, I wasn't expecting the princeling's reaction to his victory to be quite so violent."

"What's happening to John!?" You demand.

"My, my, half-elf, oddly forward for someone with no power and much to lose. But, you have caught me in a good mood. The traitor is dead and my realm is safe. For the time being at least." The largest eye seems to come a bit closer, but its strange pupils are fixed on John. When he speaks again, his voice is a bit softer. "It is no simple matter to absorb the soul of another dragonborn. Miraak was not so easily swayed by a code of conquest as true dragons are, and with the number of souls he's taken in his time his soul must be even more difficult to force into submission. And it seems that over the centuries Miraak's essence became aligned with this realm. With how... different Apocrypha is from the Shivering Isles, perhaps it is little surprise the two of them were less than compatible on such an intimate level."

You swallow. "So what happens now?"

"Your princeling is currently fighting for dominion of his soul. It seems likely he will win, but it may take some time before Miraak is forced to accept his new position. But, there is nothing more you can do for him here." The ground shakes and a pavilion rises from the muck in the center of the battlefield. One of the Black Books sits propped open on a pedestal. A large tentacle reaches out and lifts the book, setting it down in front of you. "Take this, mortal. Return the princeling to Solstheim. On neutral ground he should recover more quickly."

You turn back toward the god. "Why are you doing all this?"

"Hmm, suffice it to say that life as a prince of Oblivion is generally fairly good. It would be a shame for someone to destroy this reality. Now go. I have had enough disturbances for this century."

You reach out and touch the book, letting its light wash over you one last time.

It's dark when you wake up, but you can tell you've been moved to the main lodge. Just like last time, Dave is kneeling next to you. Even if he's trying to play it cool, you see something just a bit like worry behind his red eyes. The other three are all looking the other way though, their attention focused on John.

Wait. John!

You scramble over to him, pushing somebody out of the way. He's still breathing at least, but his face is screwed up in pain. They put a damp rag on his head like he just has a stupid fever.

"I don't know," Dirk says before you can even open your mouth. "I've seen a lot of weird shit happening with souls, but never anything quite like this. Like, dragonborn souls are weird, and daedric souls are weird, and when you put them together it's not double weird, more like weird squared. Even getting a read on his baseline is- let's just say, complicated. And it just got extra hella complicated."

"Is that all you can do?" You growl, getting to your feet. "Just shrug your fucking shoulders and say-" You feel light-headed and woozy. Okay, maybe standing up right away wasn't a good idea.

"Woah, there." Dave catches you before you can fall over. Rose helps and the two of them lower you back to the ground. "According to Frea you've been out almost two days. Give yourself a minute."
"Two days?!” you squeak, unbelieving.

"Oh! Right! You should probably have this too!" Roxy hands you a bowl full of soup.

"Come on! Aren't you assholes supposed to be ancient powerful vampires or some shit?” You demand, ignoring the offering. "You've all been completely useless this whole fucking time!"

Rose frowns. "Karkat, I know you're upset, but-"

"Upset? Why would I be upset?! I am being completely rational about the situation!” You gesture wildly and succeed in knocking the soup out of Roxy's hands and burning yourself as it spills everywhere. That, of course, does nothing to stop you. "Look, this is completely legitimate concern! A giant floating eyeball told me John is fighting for 'dominion over his soul' without saying what that actually means. Then I wake up, and you say it's been two days and that you've just been letting John sit there the whole time!"

"Dominion over…” Dirk starts. "Aw shit. Okay, that makes sense."

"What makes sense? Tell me!"

"I mean, I haven't seen dragonborn on dragonborn action for a long-ass time and it's always super fucking weird. So we just gotta wait and see how it pans out."

"Akatosh, Arkay, Azura, every god in fucking alphabetical order dammit! Aren't you supposed to be the soul guy? Isn't this the 'thing' you've spent centuries perfecting? Let me guess, that's just some front to hide the fact that you've been locking yourself in some fucking dungeon so you can jerk off for so long I'm surprised your fucking undead penis didn't snap off!"

He just gives you an unimpressed look.

You're about to shout at him again, but Dave places a hand gently on your shoulder. "Dude, chill. You've only been back in your bodies for four and a half minutes,"

"I don't care!” You roar, turning to Rose. "Come on, then, Lalonde! You're the archmage. You fixed Kanaya when she had a hole in her stomach the size of my fucking fist! Fix him!"

"It doesn't work that way,” Rose replies, her voice soft. She's trying to pacify you and you won't let it work. You refuse. "I 'fixed' Kanaya by infecting her with vampirism before she bled out. Souls are Dirk's department. If he says it's beyond him it's beyond him."

"So what? We sit here and pray for a miracle?"

The vampires don't respond, and you know that means a yes. You growl but then turn back to John. You press your forehead against his and start murmuring the ancient half-forgotten chants you learned as a child. Hey, if this is your only option, you're doing it right.

The rolling thunder and driving rain is your first clue as to what's going on. The second is that when you move you feel cool silk sheets against your bare forearm. The third is the little annoying voice going, "Lord John! Lord John! Please wake up. We need you!"

You open your eyes and sit up. Yep, you're dressed in that indecently short blue tunic and weird stiff pants, and there's a small silver and purple rabbit standing on the edge of the bed. She does a little excited or nervous dance. Rabbits don't really have facial expressions so it's hard for you to tell exactly what it means.
"What's going on?" You ask her, summoning your glasses.

"Green!"

"Huh?"

"Everything is green! It's spreading through the halls and making everything weird! And not like a good weird! Like a bad weird!"

"The color green? What the hell is that supposed to be a metaphor for?"

"I don't know, Lord John. This is your realm, not mine! But the green does not feel like you! And it's making all of the furniture weird!"

"Um, okay," you say. "Show me."

You swing your legs out of bed, shoes materializing before you hit the floor. The rabbit leads you through the halls and off to confront whatever the problem is.

But then when you pass one of the balconies, you see it. There's a dragon curled calmly on the roof of one of the towers.

"Fuck!" you call your hammer, "How did that get in here?"

"Hm? Oh, the big lizardfriends? Don't mind them. They just started showing up a few months ago. They mostly laze around. They seem to like the small lizardfriends, though! They talk and play and stuff. They're decent enough to the rest of us, but we have less in common."

The dragon closes its eyes and lowers its head when it realizes you're looking at it.

"Okay…" You say.

You let your hammer fade and the rabbit keeps leading you along, nattering on and on about all of the stuff that's been going on. She's so invested in sharing all the little details about her sister's flower collecting hobby that she seems to have mostly forgotten about whatever crisis was bad enough to force you to wake up here. You should probably remind her, but just don't have it in your heart to tell her what's really going on.

And then you turn the corner and- oh. You understand what she meant by green now. There's a sudden, jagged cutoff where instead of the cool familiar stone and detailed tapestries that are supposed to be there, the walls are covered in some weird green fabric. Wait, is that felt? Who would even do that? It looks like the floor is mostly covered with the stuff too. You approach, trying to get a closer look, but the material draws back with each step you take.

"Hooray!" the rabbit says, throwing her little stubby arms in the air. "I knew you could do it!"

"Right," you say. "When did this start happening?"

"Only a few minutes ago. One of the small lizardfriends said suddenly a tall yellowish human appeared in the middle of the room. He was confused for a moment, but then he started casting spells and that’s when everything turned green!"

"Tall yellowish human… wait, you mean like a high elf?"

"A what?"
You project an image of Scratch the way you remember him without the mask.

"Yeah! Just like that!"

She's doing a happy little dance, because of course she is. You ignore her and keep moving forward. What's he doing here? No one should be able to get in; that's what the storm's for. Or at least… that's what dad told you. It's not like it really matters. What matters is that somehow Scratch got here and you have to stop him. You should have the upper hand, but…

If you have to fight him again, you really wish you could at least conjure yourself some clothes that wouldn't threaten to reveal your midriff every time you lift your fucking arms.

You're getting closer, his presence getting clearer with each step you take. It feels slick and cool and positively foreign. You're going to stop him and get him to leave. You have to.

Now there's just one door between the two of you. It has some weird round handle on it, but before you actually make contact it turns back into the smooth iron bar you're used to. When you pull the door open, Scratch startles. Man, how come he gets to keep decent robes? He glares at you defiantly and clenches his fists.

“What are you doing here?” You ask.

“What am I doing here?” He snarls. “I don’t even know where here is! You kidnap me, drag me into some bizarre plane I know nothing about, and then have the pure audacity to taunt me by asking what I’m doing here!”

“Okay, to start with, I did not kidnap you!”

“Then what did you do?!”

“Nothing!”

“Don’t lie to me! The last thing I remember we were fighting, I was calling a dragon and then-” He gasps. “You cheated!”

“I’m pretty sure that you can’t ‘cheat’ if there aren’t rules to start with,” you point out.

“And here I thought the great hero was meant to have a sense of honor. It seems for once I miscalculated.” He sinks down into a large green armchair.

“Uh… you okay?” You take a few steps towards him. “Wait, fuck, that’s a stupid question and I just killed you so you’re probably the last person you want to see.”

He sighs. “Well, I suppose I’ll have to get used to it eventually. Since you’ve taken my soul for all eternity.”

“I did what now?”

“You really don’t know?” He rolls his eyes at you. “Eternal servitude to a complete imbecile, wonderful.”

“Hey, I outsmarted you, didn’t I?”

“Hubris.”

“Sure,” you reply, unconvinced. “But you’re saying that whatever you had rigged up to take my
soul backfired.”

“Nothing was ‘rigged up,’ you naive-” he grimaces. "Ugh, I suppose for the moment I must learn to hold my tongue. This is simply the nature of our kind. If we have the souls of dragons, is it really so surprising we can take one another?” His voice is still dripping with a sense of superiority, but it feels hollow. You almost pity the guy.

“Oh. I guess I didn't really think about that."

"What did you think absorbing a dragon's soul meant?"

"Honestly, I didn't think it was the literal soul," you admit. "More like power and life experience or something. That explains why there are a bunch of dragons outside, though…”

“There are what?” He draws back a massive felt curtain to reveal the biggest glass window you’ve ever seen in your life. But he seems more interested in looking at the courtyard. "Oh, that one's lovely, look at the iridescence on its forehead. And a calico! I haven't seen a calico dragon in ages!"

"Uh…"

He coughs and drops the curtain. "But back to the matter at hand. Just because you defeated me does not mean I am going to go gently."

"Dude, if you couldn't beat me in Apocrypha you're not gonna be able to beat me here."

He smirks. "Oh, I do not need to win. I simply need to not lose for a while. I may not understand how, but now that you stand before me I realize that this castle and everything in it… it is all part of your soul. And though you can easily overpower me while I have your attention, the moment you leave I will reconvert the areas you have reclaimed. Every moment you're here is a moment you cannot be fighting my master, and every moment you're gone my influence over you will grow. So it seems to me, we are at an impasse."

"Yeah, no," you say. "I mean, you're right that I'm gonna have to go do other stuff later, but that's not gonna help you as much as you seem to think it will."

He narrows his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"It'll be easier if I just-" You close your eyes for a moment and rearrange the rooms. Once it's back in place, you reach back and open the door, letting Scratch get a look at the dungeon. There's the rattling of chains, the clanking of manacles against iron bars, and, of course, the cacophony of bad ideas.

Pointless. Useless. It's the end of all things, why do you even try?

The village would look lovely wrapped in flames, wouldn't it? It'll be easy, just a little spark in the right part of the thatch roof…

Hurt him. He's under your power, do whatever you want.

Why are you even bothering with us? Think of all the mischief you could be up to back in the real world. They trust you so much, and there are a few girls who'd be happy to-

Do you really have to move forward? Stay here… with us…

"Yeah, okay, that's enough." You slam the door and push the dungeon back down, burying it as
deep and far away as you can. And then you open your eyes again.

Scratch has gone completely white he looks at you with fear in his eyes. "W-what were those… those things?!" he demands.

Oh gosh, maybe you took it too far? Guh, you know it's important but you still feel so slimy threatening people. "I don't want to do that to you," you say, trying to calm him down. "You're a person, not some weird metaphor for a family curse. But I'll do what I have to. The stuff going on out there is too important.

He narrows his eyes. "What are you playing at? If our positions were switched I never would have given you this chance."

"I mean, if you're anywhere near as cold and logical as you pretend to be I think we can work something out."

"I am unconvinced this is not a trap," he says.

"A trap for what? It's not like there's much for me to take at this point."

"I suppose that's true. So, as you wish." He sits back down. "Let's talk."

Chapter End Notes

We're getting close to the end! I only have two chapters left now, and I may or may not write an epilogue.

This was already a bit on the long side, so I'll leave the final wrapping up of the Solstheim arc for next week.

Also, if you were curious, Karkat's armor is very heavily based on the ancient falmer armor, which appears in dawnguard. http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Ancient_Falmer_Armor I felt this would be far cooler and more appropriate for him than the dwarven armor that's actually at the end of the dungeon.
Chapter Notes

Does this chapter count as filler? Character development? Plot? Exposition? Who knows!

Probably some of each. But tbh it's mostly fluff.

Also, I've noticed a direct relationship between asking for comments and getting comments. So please do leave them! It really helps me stay motivated and I love hearing from readers, especially those of you who got this far, since your engagement isn't easily measured by kudos.

SUNDAS 5TH RAIN'S HAND, 4E202 –EARLY MORNING BECAUSE WE'RE BACK ON THE FUCKING VAMPIRE SCHEDULE AGAIN GODS FUCKING DAMMIT.

JOHN STILL ISN'T AWAKE. DIRK SAYS HIS SOUL SEEMS TO HAVE "gotten closer to normal. For him. Or at least settled down." LIKE THAT'S SUPPOSED TO MAKE ME FEEL BETTER WHEN HE STILL WON'T FUCKING WAKE UP.

THE STRILALONDES DECIDED THAT THE BEST THING TO DO WOULD BE TO GET GOING AND HOPE HE WAKES UP ALONG THE WAY. THANKFULLY, IT TURNS OUT DIRK CAN SUMMON THIS MASSIVE WHITE HORSE AND THEN ROXY JUST SNAPPED HER FINGERS AND MADE A LITTLE CART FOR IT. SINCE NONE OF US COULD HAVE CARRIED JOHN THE WHOLE WAY AND MY LEGS STILL FEEL LIKE JELLY AFTER LIKE TEN MINUTES OF WALKING, THE TWO OF THEM PROBABLY SAVED US A DAY OR TWO WITH THAT THING. WHICH MAKES ME FEEL LIKE AN ASS FOR CALLING THEM USELESS LAST NIGHT, BUT IT WAS TRUE THEN, DAMMIT.


WE'RE BACK IN THE ABANDONED TOWER FOR THE DAY AND THE BOAT SHOULD BE READY AT SUNSET. HERE'S HOPING JOHN WAKES UP BEFORE ME THE WAY HE USUALLY DOES.
To your immense disappointment, John is still gone when you wake up. Gone, not asleep, because he's flat on his back and completely silent except for calm, steady breathing. There's no rolling around, no murmuring, no snoring, and he doesn't react to your touch, even when you give him a proper shake. Gods, you wish there was something you could do. You even went and talked to the town alchemist this morning, but she doesn't know anything that would help with soul injuries either. But then again, his soul not being normal is kind of what got you into this mess in the first place so maybe it's better not to try to treat it.

When he gets back – you're not even gonna think the word 'if,' nope – you're never letting him do anything on his own again. He is going to teach you how to jump into his soul and murder whatever the fuck is doing this to him if it so much as dares to try again. Rose woke up enough to kick you out in the afternoon. Apparently you were interrupting their beauty sleep, which they were totally entitled to while you were ripping your hair out with worry because – newsflash, dickwad – Your boyfriend was in actual palpable mortal danger. So now you're stuck outside. There's not that many places to go, so you wind up sitting at the pier. You glance over towards the sun as often as you dare, just to make sure it is actually inching down over the horizon.

People bustle along behind you, carrying out their end-of-the-day business in a way that's uncomfortably close to familiar. Maybe if you try you can forget that you're looking over the water from the wrong side. And once you do that you can ignore the little ways the people's accents are wrong, that the e's are too nasally and the s's too light. Then maybe you can pretend that things are really back to normal, that the past three years didn't happen and you're not going to have to deal with anything worse than Kankri coming down and bitching at you for missing dinner again.

You close your eyes and fall back on the dock. Sometimes you think that's the most logical explanation, that this is all just some overly long and complicated dream. How else could someone like you get caught up in all this important shit? But the warm grain of the wood feels real against your fingers, and so does the cool ocean breeze on your skin. And deep down you don't want this to be fake. If it was you never would have met John. And even if you won't admit it to him, you'd be hard pressed to find anything you wouldn't give up in exchange for your world having him in it.

Someone else walks down the dock. You feel the structure shift slightly with each step and the wood creaks softly, barely audible over the waves lapping at the supports. They stop a few inches from your head, but you decide you don't care. If they've got a problem they can just fuck right off. You're not in the mood. But before the first syllable even leaves their mouth, you recognize their voice and your heart skips a beat.

"Wha'cha thinking about?" John asks.

You open your eyes and he towers above you, leaning over with that big goofy grin on his face like nothing's wrong. "Oh, not much," you grumble, "Fantasizing about how I'm going to throw your ass into the fucking ocean as soon as I get up."

He laughs, light and carefree and so very John that you have to look away to keep from smiling. He sits down next to you and places one hand on your shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm fine."

"I wasn't worried," you huff, sitting back up.

"Of course not," he says, smile in his voice making it clear you were absolutely unconvincing. But at least he's learned not to push it. He throws his arm around you and pulls you close. You reward him by leaning into his touch and resting your head on his shoulder.

"What happened in there?" you ask. "You gonna be okay?"
"Yeah! Miraak and I talked some stuff out and it's all gonna be fine from here on out."

"What?" You push him away to stare at him incredulously. "I thought we were done with him! Like you were supposed to destroy his soul, right?"

He makes an uncomfortable noise. "So it turns out it's not so much destroying as taking souls. And it's a lot more literal than I thought so now he kind of just lives in my head."

"So what? You just sat down and just had a friendly little chat with the guy on team destroy-the-universe?! And why aren't you calling him Scratch anymore?"

He shrugs. "Well, I'm pretty sure he's actually a different person, it's a long story. Like, six thousand years makes for a hell of a biography. Anyway, we managed to come to an understanding."

"So he just gave up?"

"Well, not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly? What did you do?!"

"It's okay, Karkat. We worked it out, and since I won he's gonna help us from time to time in exchange for getting to crash in one of the nicer parts of my brain."

You gape at him. "So he told you he'd suddenly switch sides for no good reason and you believed him?!

"I can hear his thoughts. Kinda hard for him to lie. Plus, the fact that we're kind of stuck together now is a pretty good reason to work together if you ask me. Besides, if he gets annoying I'm good at ignoring obnoxious voices."

You sigh. "You know what? I'm never gonna get the mechanics of this shit, so I just hope you're right."

"Heh, me too." He leans in to kiss you, brief and chaste but awfully sweet. When he speaks again his voice is soft and low, a beautiful rumble of sound he reserves only for you. "Trust me, I'm not going anywhere."

You want to melt into him. His sweetness can be almost overwhelming, and fuck it you were worried. But you're in public. So you swallow your emotion and say, "Good. Because the next time you do I really am shoving you in the water. A mile off shore. In Morning Star."

He snorts and pulls you close, burying his face in your hair. You nestle against his chest and let yourself listen to the steady, strong beat of his heart until your ship is ready to go.

When you land in Windhelm, you and the vampires go your separate ways. Apparently they have some other last minute stuff they have to do. Or maybe it's not-so-last minute because they said something about time travel, but you don't care. The four of them are pretty cool, but the undead make shitty travelling companions. You and Karkat take your bags and head across the city to Mr. Vantas’ house alone.

By the time you make it there it’s full morning, so instead of slinking in quietly like last time, Karkat throws the door open and bellows, “Ati! I’m home!”
There’s a screech and a book gets flung at his head. He barely dodges out of the way.

“Kankri, what the ever-loving fuck? I was just saying hi. Trying to be a good fucking family member and shit.” Karkat marches inside, still ranting at his brother.

You pick the book off the ground and follow him inside. It smells like meat and eggs, and you really hope that there’ll be some for you.

Karkat continues. "You knew it was me, you know what I sound like. And even if you didn't who throws a book at someone the moment the door opens? Honestly, Kankri. Sometimes I can't fucking believe-" Kankri tries to cut him off, but Karkat doesn’t stop so they just talk over each other and get louder and louder and-

“Boys, that’s enough!” Mr. Vantas says, throwing open the door. Karkat and Kankri both shut up and slink back a bit. “That’s better. Anyway, welcome home, dear son.” He kisses Karkat's forehead and then turns to you, switching to Cyrodillic. “And hello, John. I trust the trip went well?”

“Well, nobody died,” Karkat says. “Or at least no one we care about.”

*Excuse him,* Miraak says.

You choose to ignore his commentary.

Mr. Vantas laughs. “I suppose that’s the best I could ask. How long will you be staying?”

“Just a day or two.” You say. "We need to get back to Whiterun.”

“Ah, yes, important Dragonborn business, I assume?”

"Yeah," you reply with a nod.

He looks at you for a moment and then turns back to Karkat. "I'm not going to ask exactly what's going on, but if it's scaring John, you will write me the moment you're safe. Or I will bring you back to life just to kill you again myself-"

"-You know a guy." Karkat finishes. "I know, Ati."

"Good boy." Mr. Vantas boops him on the nose, and Karkat looks deeply offended. "The room is still set up like you left it. You look tired, but food's almost ready."

"Huh? Were you expecting us?" you ask.

"No, I'm not quite that good. But we can bring out some extra bread and cheese and throw a couple more eggs on the fire. They cook fast."

"We're fine, Ati," Karkat insists at the same time as you say, "I mean, I could eat."

"John, you could always eat," Karkat gripes.

"That's why I'm taller than you."

"Psh, yeah that's totally how that works."

"To be completely honest," Mr. Vantas says with a shrug. "I don't care about the reason. I'll just take whatever actually gets you to eat regularly. Come on." He beckons you into the kitchen.
All three of you follow and sit around the wooden table. Mr. Vantas takes what food he already has prepared and sets it out in front of you. He asks you about a million questions and you and Karkat wind up recounting your entire trip. He focuses most intensely when you talk about Raven Rock and Tel Mithryn. You figure he's planning to sell the information later, but you tell him as much as you can remember anyway because he's been so nice to you. It's not like you found out about anything top secret anyway.

By the time you get to the end, Karkat looks like he's about ready to pass out. He's so tired he actually lets you tuck him into bed when you get upstairs. He doesn't so much as complain until you actually open the door to leave.

"Say ih me," he mumbles.

"What?"

"Stay with me," he repeats more clearly.

"Aww, do you want snuggles?"

"Stop being a dick and get over here."

"Hehe, okay." You shut the door again and slide into bed with him.

He puts his arms around your shoulders and buries his face in your chest. "That's better."

"Heh," you stroke his hair gently. You know better than to say it, but he's absolutely adorable like this, all curled up like a kitten but still clinging to you. Still, you want to say something. You settle on, "Hey Karkat?"

"Mmm?"

"I love you."

"Love you too," he replies. Or you're assuming that's what he said. He didn't bother pulling his head away, so it came out a garbled mess. But you're pretty sure that's what he means.

You content yourself with laying there and watching as he slowly falls asleep. That is, until Miraak decides to interrupt you.

You've been like that for fifteen minutes, he complains.

Yes, we have.

Don't you have that errand you've been obsessing over?

I'm not obsessing! And I'll get around to it.

You've been thinking about it an awful lot...

Yeah, and it is important. But like I said, I'll get around to it.

He's quiet for a moment but then he starts up again.

I do not think this is necessary.

I don't think your face is necessary.
Ugh, Please don't tell me I'll be spending most of eternity dealing with this kind of asinine behavior.

If it bugs you so much, go find something else to do.

Miraak grumbles but his voice grows softer as he buries himself back in your subconscious.

As much as you hate to admit it, he does have a point. You're not that tired yet, and if Karkat's asleep here, there's no way he'll see you at the market…

Once you're sure he's really out, you gently extricate yourself from his grasp. He whines but doesn't wake up. It's absolutely pathetic, and it breaks your heart just a little bit. You give his hair one more loving stroke and then turn to leave. He'll thank you for this soon enough.

…You hope.

The next day, you’ve rested up, gotten supplies, and now you’re ready to head back west. The sky is clear, there's a nice breeze outside, and it's not too hot or too cold. You actually woke up before John, full of energy but oddly relaxed. You should probably be a ball of anxiety at this point; Azura knows you were after your nap last night until John distracted you. Maybe it's because now you know you're going to be making tangible progress. The road from Windhelm to Whiterun is a pretty clear one. Getting from point A to point B should be easy, especially now that the war's over and trade's picking up again.

John does not seem to share your opinion. When you go to wake him up for breakfast he just groans and rolls over.

"Come on, lazy ass," you say, pulling the blanket away.

He whines at you wordlessly and doesn't move.

"John, there's food."

"Fuck off."

You blink. "Usually that's my line. You okay?"

He opens one eye just enough to glare at you.

"What?"

"S your fucking fault."

"What did I do?"

"What did I do?" he repeats mockingly. "You killed me. I am dead. Good luck saving the world."

You roll your eyes. "And you call me a drama queen. Maybe we've been together too long. I must be rubbing off on you."

"If you just rubbed off on me my spine would still be in one piece! But no, we decided to try and see if I can fold in fucking half!"

"Oh. Oops."
"Yeah."

"Why didn't you say anything?" You demand. "You should have told me!"

"Yeah, well, it didn't hurt then and I had no idea how much of a fit my back was going to throw this morning." He's blushing and refusing to make eye contact.

You sigh. "Okay, onto your stomach you big lug."

"What? Karkat, there is no way in Oblivion I'm about to-"

"I'm going to give you a backrub, you idiot. We need you functional."

"Oh." He rolls over and you head over to the trunk, pulling out a topical healing potion.

"Okay, where does it hurt?" you ask, pulling the cork and kneeling on the side of the bed.

"Lower back and shoulders mostly."

"Got it." He whimpers slightly as you push his shift up. "Relax, you big baby."

"You are the literal worst at aftercare, you know that?"

Without saying a word you pour some of the potion just above his ass. He winces at the cold, but then sighs contently as you work it into his skin. You know he likes it when you speak to him in Dunmeri, so you lean over and whisper, "You're going to be okay. Don't worry, I've got you."

He groans softly. "Okay, I take it back."

You laugh and start working your way up his spine, gently massaging every inch of muscle. "Gods you looked beautiful, though, eyes glazed over with your knees up over your head. I hope you let me keep the marks on your thighs."

"Y-yeah. That should be fine," he replies with a shiver.

"I'm glad."

Finally you reach his shoulders. You pour out the rest of the potion and maybe spend a little more time rubbing it in than you need to. But fuck this part of his body is flawless. It's all firm muscle but he melts wherever you touch him. Thank Stendarr for warhammers. Seriously. But all too soon his skin has soaked up the liquid and the slight glow fades.

"Feeling better?" you ask.

He nods.

"Alright. Let's get some clothes on you and head downstairs."

He makes a happy little noise and stands up, stretching. "Fucking Kynareth, that is really is as good as new. You are the absolute best, Karkat."

"I donno about that…"

"Seriously," he pulls his tunic over his head. "You are. I love you." He kisses you soft and sweet and for a moment you just lose yourself.
"Dammit, John," you breathe. "That's exactly the kind of behavior that got you into that mess in the first place."

"Nuh-huh. It's your fault."

"How is it my fault? You came on to me and you were practically begging for me to fuck you."

He grins and giggles. "Yeah, but we both know I can't be held responsible for my actions under the influence of hot elf."

You feel yourself blushing. "Oh stop it."

His bright blue eyes sparkle mischievously. "Stop as in really stop, or stop as in 'I'm loving this but also really bad at taking compliments'?"

"Both," you admit. "But mostly stop as in I told my dad I was just running up to tell you there was food and I don't want him to get suspicious."

"Okay, that's fair." He steps away from you to finish getting dressed.

Part of you regrets passing up the chance to make out a little, but it's overruled by the part of you that doesn't want to deal with the humiliation of getting caught.

But you leave before him and no one seems to suspect a thing. Kankri barely notices as you come down, he's too busy ranting about how annoying Eridan's brother has been recently, and your father just acknowledges you with a nod of his head. John wanders down fully dressed in the middle of the rant and just waves a hello to you all. Eventually, Kankri has to shut up to shove a chunk of potato down his throat. And your dad, after many years of practice, takes the opportunity to yank the conversation away from him.

"So," he starts casually in Dunmeri. "I heard you two last night."

You feel your heart stop. John chokes on his eggs. Well, so much for not having to deal with the humiliation of getting caught.

"Oh, good, you taught your boy our language. I was planning to keep this as a more subtle transfer of knowledge from father to son, but now I can express my disappointment/rage properly to you both, which is fucking perfect/lucky."

You both pull back a little in your chairs. He's going to throw your assess out, isn't he? Well, at least you're ready to go.

"Let me be clear and concise. I cannot believe that my son fucks like such a goddamn amateur!"

Kankri spits out his cider and turns bright red. "Ata! This is completely inappropriate and I for one-"

"Oh, it is abso-fucking-lutely appropriate! As much as the two of you complain about me, I would have thought he would have at least learned something!"

John starts giggling.

"And you have no right to laugh either," he snaps, turning to John. "That was the saddest attempt at seduction I have seen in a long, long time. You're no better than he is, but at least I can't be certain that you should have known better!" He glares back at you in disgust. "Honestly, Karkat, you
sounded like one of those damn books you used to smuggle in. There are reasons I didn't let you keep them. I am absolutely sure that Fellations person was a fool/total virgin. Worse than your brother, even."

Said brother gets up and leaves the room, his face the color of a ripe tomato.

"And no one actually translates 'making love' into another language. It just makes you sound like an idiot. Honestly, I'm almost surprised you lasted more than five minutes." He digs angrily into his porridge.

John stares at him in a mixture of fear and awe. You strongly consider going back up to the bedroom, curling up, and dying. Instead, you just down your breakfast as quickly as possible. Yeah, okay, time to go throw yourself at Lord English. It would be a mercy killing at this point.

The Great River Road has more traffic than you've ever seen in Skyrim. There's all kinds of supply carts, carriages, and people travelling around on foot. You don't see a single wolf, bear, sabercat, or bandit. When you mention this to Karkat, he says that it's closer to how he remembers it being when he started off. He says he thinks it's because now there are actually guards patrolling, making sure the way stays clear. Spring's set in too, making your journey even more pleasant. Flowers are blooming, and the trees have gone from having tiny buds to full leaves that help keep the sun off your backs for most of the day. Birds flit from branch to branch, alternately singing cheerfully and squawking angrily when another bird gets too close.

You come across a few hunters and a Khajiit caravan, both of whom are willing to buy some of the goods and ingredients you brought back from Solstheim for a good chunk of gold. Way more than you paid for it, anyway. You assume that's probably a good thing since you're not sure when everyone will show up in Whiterun, and even with the Companions helping out you're still probably going to rent have to out like the whole bannered mare for at least a few nights. You're just glad Karkat's taking it upon himself to do all of the logistics. Of course you can plan and do math and stuff, but you always liked working with your hands more than with numbers. And it's probably good to give him a real challenge once in a while.

But because you stop to trade, it's already sunset by the time you reach Valtheim towers. Not that you mind because goddamn that view. Looking out from the top of the ridge you can see the plains beneath spread out for miles and miles, the flatness occasionally interrupted by a patchwork cloth of fields, many of which are just starting to sprout. Whiterun itself is silhouetted against the setting sun, every bit of stonework black against the orange sky. Its shadow stretches out long and thin, so you can see light flickering in the windows of some of the farmers' houses.

"Do you want to keep going?" Karkat asks.

You shake your head. "It'd be another three, four hours from here if we walked, and riding in the dark usually doesn't end well."

"Yeah. I guess we're not really in a rush now if we have four days to get there." He drops his bag against the tower and sits down, staring off into the distance.

"Kinda fitting too. This was the first place we camped out together, remember?" You take Shadowmere's saddle and bridle off, letting him wander over to munch on some grass.

"Shit, you're right. I can't believe that was only Last Seed. It feels like it's been years, doesn't it?"

"Heh, that or just a few weeks." You plop down next to him
He shakes his head, but he's smiling. It's quiet for a few moments, but then he says, "You know? Whatever happens, I'm glad I met you."

You should say something profound. Something deep and meaningful that he'll remember for the rest of his life. But you've got nothing, so instead you just smile back and say, "Yeah. I feel the same way."

Karkat nudges a little closer to you, and since no one else is around he lets you scoop him up into your lap. He's warm and solid and heavy, his shape familiar in your arms. You put your head on his shoulder and press your cheek to his. The sharp scent of soap still clings to his clothes, but under that he smells like elf and alchemical medium and horse. You're not sure exactly when that combination started to feel so comfortable to you, but now it smells like home almost as much as warm stone and freshly cut hay do.

The two of you sit and watch as the shadows grow longer and the sky turns slowly from orange to purple to black. Now the tables have turned, with Whiterun and its farms blazing against the pale light of the stars. The moons are so big and bright that you could read by them. Crickets chirp and the breeze shakes the trees, but other than that it's silent, and you let yourself enjoy holding your boyfriend for a good long while.

---

Getting to Whiterun was the easiest thing you’ve done in a while. You and John wake up a little after sunrise and make it to town well before noon. The two of you are at the stables, paying the hands to watch Shadowmere for a few days, when John gasps excitedly.

You turn to ask him what's going on, but all you see is a green and black blur and then some woman is embracing him tightly. And he's… he's hugging her back. The woman is tall, slim, and graceful, like some great tree made human. Her smooth, flawless skin is almost as dark as the midnight-black hair that to her waist in tiny delicate ringlets. She wears flowing green robes made from some kind of fine, light material that all but floats in the slight breeze. She's one of the most beautiful women you've ever seen in your life, and she's clinging passionately to John, your John. Her long, dexterous fingers grip his shirt like she's afraid he’ll disappear, and he's squeezing her back just as tightly. They kiss each other briefly and chastely and then press their foreheads together. He just looks at her so sweetly, eyes overflowing with love. Your chest clenches and your throat feels tight. Who the fuck is this person?!

"I missed you," he says.

"Missed you too, you dork." Then she takes a step back and turns to you. "And you must be Karkat! John’s told me so so much, it’s really great to finally get to meet you!" She grins, shaking your hand eagerly.

"Um, hi," you reply. You look over at John, confused and afraid and still a little bit hurt. He cocks his head to the side a little bit, like it's weird for you to feel this way.

"Oh!" The women giggles to herself. "Sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself. I'm Jade."

"Oh!" The cousin. The one John told you about a million times. The cousin you've known would be coming for months. Of course she is. And, if you think about it, you remember hearing jokes and comments about how kissing family in Cyrodiil is a thing. It's not romantic, definitely not sexual. Totally normal familial affection, just on the lips instead of the forehead or cheeks. Self, calm your fucking tits. “Yeah, I'm Karkat. John’s told me a lot about you too. Hi."
She hugs you too, but not for as long or as tightly as she'd held John. Thankfully, she's not quite tall enough for your head to be in her boobs, because that's super awkward and you never know what to do, but it's close. She lets you go and takes a step back, smiling brightly at you. Her front teeth stick out just a little bit, just like John's do, but she's got a tiny adorable gap between them.

Actually, now that you look at them side by side you can really see the similarities. She's got a lot more Redguard in her, with the curly hair and fuller lips, but behind the glasses they have the same eye shape, even if hers look a lot greener. And honestly you're not sure how the nose wasn't a dead giveaway. Everything is fine and you're an idiot and an asshole. Nothing new there. At least you didn't say anything out loud this time.

She starts walking back towards the gates and he goes with her. You follow a few steps behind. Don't mind you, you'll be fine. Really. You don't know who started it, but they're holding hands now with the kind of casual affection John always wants but you can never properly give.

"The others are at your house," she explains, "I just came out because I like the horses."

"They're here too? Man, this is so awesome! I thought we'd have a few more days alone, but I guess we got a little behind in Solstheim. Anyway, how are the other two doing?"

"Jane's good. She apparently picked up a whole bunch of recipes from Hammerfell and they're really tasty! And Jake's doing pretty well considering we've been making him sleep on the floor."

"Oof, why?"

"Because," she shifts into the noble accent. "It is unacceptable and improper for family members of different sexes to sleep together beyond a certain age."

John snorts. "Wow, Jade."

"Oh, you're not gonna lecture me about being mean to him, are you?"

"Hey, we're cool now. Don't be like that."

"Come on, you got to spend like four years being an asshole while I was stuck being the voice of reason. Also it's not like he couldn't go rent a room if he wanted to." Or at least that's what you think she's saying. As they keep talking to each other their accents are getting thicker and thicker. The letter T? What's that?

"Aww maybe he finally wants to play nice with us."

"About fifteen years late for you, right?"

"Yeah, well. Teenagers are dicks."

"Speak for yourselves. I stayed out of it and Jane was trying to get you two to cut it out from the start."

"We're not having this fight again," John says, groaning.

Jade huffs. "Okay, fine."

"Anyway, are you done in High Rock now?"

"Yep! We finished up right after I wrote you last. No more stupid vampire-werewolf wars. It turns out the chief werewolf was a total dick and wanted to take over the whole province, but we teamed
up with his daughter to put her in charge of the pack and she was a lot more reasonable about everything. Like she was actually willing to sit down and talk with Dave."

"Yeah, so tell me more about you and Dave," he tries to keep his tone casual, but you can feel the little bit of accusation embedded in it.

So can she, if her little flinch is anything to go by. "Oh, uh, that's complicated."

"He didn't make it sound complicated."

"Okay, if he finds out I told you the details he'll be pissed so…"

"So wait until we get home?"

"Exactly."

He huffs a little. "Fine."

"How do you know him, though?" Jade asks.

"Well, apparently his sister is the Archmage of the college in Winterhold, and we kinda met up with them up there and their other two siblings and then they told us the thing about our souls being from a parallel universe and then-"

"Wait, what?"

"Dave didn't mention that?"

"No! Okay, as soon as we get you two settled in, you are doing my hair because it's almost dry, and we'll have a mutual debriefing. Deal?"

"Deal. Hey, did any of Karkat's friends show up yet?"

You perk up a little bit. It’s partially at the prospect of having someone you know to talk to, but mostly because he remembered you exist even when he’s talking to his cousin! …You shouldn’t be so excited about that.

"I mean, there's a few other dark elves around town, but I'm not sure when they got there or who they are. We've kind of just been hanging out and catching up ourselves."

"Damn." He actually sounds a little put out. Huh.

By that time you're at the house. Jade opens the door and proclaims, "Hey, guys! Look who I found!"

A man and a woman sit at the table playing cards. They both turn to look as Jade calls out and then smile brightly when they see the three of you. Or John and Jade, really. They don't know you, so why would they care?

The woman, presumably Jane, gets up first and comes over to greet her cousin. She's a full head shorter than him and a bit on the plump side. She looks a lot more like John than Jade does, with the same textured hair cropped just a tad longer and a slightly rounder and less angular version of his face. She moves more like him too, steps heavy and unselfconscious, giving a sense of confidence and strength. Her smile is soft and friendly, eyes full of gentle warmth as she embraces John. And, yeah, okay the kissing is definitely just an Imperial thing because he does it to her too. He picks her up and swings her around, earning him a little laugh and a light swat on the chest.
Jake follows after putting the cards away. Turns out Dirk's description of him as "basically John but six inches shorter" was pretty apt, if maybe a bit generous on the height. But then again, the fact that he stands up straight while John usually doesn't might have factored into the mistaken height. He's not wearing armor, because why would he in a house, but he moves like the kind of person you could see favoring leather, light and precise. But with all of them together he probably looks the most like Jade, with the lighter build, thicker hair, and striking green eyes. They have the same chin too, just a little more pointed than John or Jane's. Apparently he and John are in fact "cool" now, because even if it's not quite as sweet as it was with Jade or as playful as it was with Jane, their greeting doesn't seem awkward or forced.

"Okay, so Jake, Jane, this is Karkat. Karkat, this is Jake and Jane."

You wave a bit uneasily. At least he introduced you properly this time.

"Here," Jane says, smiling sweetly. "Since you're basically family now." She gives you a crushing hug. Fucking Boethiah she's strong, but it's still kind of nice. She smells like spices and fresh bread and her dress is made of the same light material as Jade's, although it's pale blue instead of green. You're not sure what kind of cloth it is, but it's nice and soft under your fingers and you want some.

"Don't hurt the poor lad," Jake says. Huh, apparently he just talks in a proper Cyrodiilic accent.

Okay.

"Oh, if he's used to John it's nothing," she lets go and waves him off.

"Yeah, I'm fine," you say.

"Oh, that's right!" Jake goes back to John and whispers in something in his ear.

John gasps excitedly. "Oh my gods you are the best!"

"I do try, dear cousin," Jake replies, reaching up and patting him on the shoulder. "But that's for later. I'm sure you and Karkat want to get settled back in. Those rucksacks look rather heavy…"

You get most of your stuff stashed in your room and then take your cousins over to the Bannered Mare. As much as you'd love to have them all stay over, unless they all want to pull up bedrolls around the hearth you just don't have the space. Besides, you have a plan for tonight. You get their things upstairs and buy everyone some lunch. Within about three minutes Karkat and Jake are comparing notes on dwemer ruins and you can't tell if they're agreeing or not because while you understand the words they're saying individually, when they're put together like that...

You raise an eyebrow at Jane, hoping she understands what's going on better than you do.

Sadly, she just mirrors your look.

You shrug.

She sighs with exasperation and rolls her eyes.

Jade taps you on the shoulder. “Hey,” she says, "I think it's about that time."

You nod and stand up. “We’ll be right back.”

Jane frowns in a clear “Don’t leave me here with them!”

Honestly you feel kind of bad for ditching her, but not enough to give up your chance to get out. So
you just grin at her. Karkat and Jake don’t even respond. They’re too distracted by something something resonance stones. Whatever those are. You turn away and let Jade lead you upstairs to one of the rooms they're renting.

The door closes behind you with a gentle click as Jade goes through her pack, pulling out her wide-toothed ivory comb and a vial of hair oil. She takes a seat on the bed and you kneel behind her, taking the comb from her hand. It’s smooth and cool under your touch, and the two of you settle down as you begin the old familiar movements, as much ritual as maintenance.

"Okay," you say as you start working through her thick hair. "So you and Dave?"

Jade sighs. "I mean, the short version of it is that when Dave and I met there was obviously something there, and we did a little bit of kissing and hand holding and things like that, but as soon as anything regarding feelings happened he just shut down. It got kind of stupid for a while. He wouldn't even talk to me. Apparently he was super afraid of getting attached."

You wrinkle your nose. "Wow, I didn't realize he was that kind of guy."

"I mean, I kind of get where he's coming from. If you live four thousand years, most of the people you love die. Like basically everybody. And he's tired of getting hurt."

"But it's not fair if that hurts you!"

"I'm okay, John. Really." She sounds like she means it, but still… Her not getting attached is almost as ridiculous as Karkat not getting attached.

You put the comb to the side and try to smooth her hair down into something more manageable. Gosh this feels nice, after being combed her hair is like a cloud and you've missed it. You cover your hands with the oil and start to gently work it in.

"But!" she says after a few moments. "That might not be a problem too much longer!"

"Huh? I thought you said they couldn't turn werewolves."

"They can't."

"Did you somehow get un-wolfified?"

"No, and I don’t want to. Being a werewolf is kind of cool, and it's not like Hircine could take my soul no matter how hard he tries. No, we're thinking of going the other way. After this is over Dave's gonna try having his vampirism cured."

"No way. Isn't that like his big thing?" You divide her hair into four sections and then start braiding.

"Yeah, but apparently he’s getting tired of it. He said he really kind of wants to go back and try living a normal life. He just thinks he needs to get through this fight first."

You scoff. "Oh, of course. There's always an excuse."

"Well, I guess it could be an excuse, but the prophecy says he's supposed to fight with us, right? And pretty much everyone who's taken a vampirism cure had only been turned for a couple years at most. What if the magic's all that's holding him together now? What if he-" she takes a deep breath. “Coming back to life might just kill him.”
"I donno. It still feels like… like he might be trying to take advantage of you or something."

You can practically hear her rolling her eyes. "John, has he actually done anything bad that you know of, or are you being suspicious for no reason?"

"I just… I don't want anything bad to happen to you. People can be dicks."

"Yeah, and Egberts can be overprotective," she says with a light laugh. "Come on, you think I don't feel the same way about you? Like, I don't think Karkat has bad intentions or anything, and I trust your judgment, but still…"

You sigh a little over dramatically. "Man, what are we gonna do? Other than add paranoia to the list of things wrong with this family, I mean."

"Retire early and live off taxes like normal nobles?" She asks.

"Pfft, Yeah, right!"

She giggles. You smile back, even though she can't see it.

"But, I mean, at least with me and Karkat… It's not like you and Dave."

"What do you mean? Like he's an elf so there's still a lifespan thing, and like I said Dave's going to try to get cured."

"Well, he's only half, so it's not quite as bad. But that's not what I was talking about. It's just that since we're both guys neither of us could accidentally… You know."

"Neither of you can what?"

"I mean, what if… what if you make a mistake and… something happens? I know you know how to be careful with potions and infertility spells and stuff but making that kind of choice sucks."

She snorts. "Oh Colonel's book, I've missed your sense of humor."

"I'm serious, Jade. What if you wind up having a kid and he can't be there for you?"

"Alright, John, the joke's going a little far, even for you. I know it's rude to mention, but you spent over a week camping with the guy and you really didn't notice-" She turns to look at you. You just blink back at her. "Oh wow, you really didn't notice." She smiles and shakes her head, almost pulling the tiny braid from your grasp. "Trust me; you don't have to worry about it. Our odds of accidentally having a kid are about as good as yours."

You frown. "I still don't get what you-"

"Anyway!" she interjects. "Changing the subject! Jake wouldn't tell me; what's in that box he brought?"

"Oh, it's just some of my extra clothes and a present for Karkat."

"Why the heck wouldn't he tell me about that? Oh gods, please don't tell me it's some weird sex thing!"

"It's not some weird sex thing!" You feel your cheeks heating up. Because it's really not! Gah, why would she even think that?! "But it is a little bit personal…"
"Alright," she says with a dramatic sigh, "I won't mention it."

"Thanks."

"Now, what about parallel universes? That sounded absolutely fascinating!"

The two of you keep exchanging stories, going on tangents and occasionally squabbling as you do. But it's nice. Even if doing her hair takes longer than usual because you are apparently really out of practice. It takes you almost an extra hour, but when you're done her hair hangs in a beautiful cascade of small braids. Your hands feel like they're going to fall off, but your cousin beams at you and you think it'll be alright.

"That feels so much better! Gosh, John, you have no idea how hard it is to find someone who can braid properly in High Rock! I had to do it all by myself and it took forever."

You laugh. "I'm almost surprised you didn't have Dave do it."

"He's hopeless. He tried once, but he only managed to fit like twelve on my whole head."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. And they fell out in less than a week." She stands up and stretches. "Anyway, let's go rescue our boyfriends."

"Sounds good to me."
There are way more people hanging around downstairs than there were when you and Jade left, but it's still not exactly packed, and most people seem to be wrapping up and leaving. You figure that you must have just missed the dinner rush. Jane, Jake and Karkat are still sitting at the same table, drinking and chatting and generally looking like they're having a decent enough time. Or at least there aren't any loud disagreements. The conversation has somehow shifted off of dwemer stuff and onto bread. Kind of weird, but at least now you'll be able to contribute. (You'll have to remember to thank Jane later. You get the distinct feeling this was her doing.)

Karkat sees you out of the corner of his eye and immediately perks up. "Good timing. We were just about to send out a fucking search party."

"You miss the part where we left?" you ask, taking a seat next to him.

"Yeah, but you said you'd 'be right back' and it's been like five hours."

You shrug. "Jade has a lot of hair."

He looks over at Jade and his jaw drops. "You did that?"

"Don't sound so shocked!"

He blushes and turns back to his mug. "Sorry I didn't realize that betlemages also trained for proficiency in hair styling."

You grin at him. "What, are you jealous? I mean, I'm not exactly sure how well it'd suit you, but if you grow your hair out for a few years-"

He kicks you under the table and glares at you.

"I know you're being facetious," Jane says. "But if you're going to have long hair on the road you've got to do something to take care of it."

"I mean, it wasn't actually part of the curriculum," you clarify. "But it was something to do when I was hanging out with Jade and Jane."

"His dad thought it was adorable!" Jade adds.

"Yeah, well."

"You know," Karkat says, giving you a wicked grin. "John's never told me that much about when he was a kid."
"That's probably because every single story ends with something burning down and/or a near-death experience for once of us," Jade replies with a shrug.

"They do not!" You argue.

"Oh yeah? Name one."

There was the first time you went to Chorrol- wait no. The time you were supposed to go fix the- actually, no…

Wow, you really were destructive, Miraak says with an air of amusement in his voice.

You choose to ignore him. Then finally an idea comes to you. "I've got it!"

"Oh?" Jane asks.

"Yeah! So this happened when I was six and just starting out as a page in Chorrol. The count gave me a really urgent letter to send to the emperor, and it was so important that he wanted me to send a copy with all three of the pigeons we had from the Imperial City."

Jake chuckles to himself.

"Yeah, that time. So I literally ran to the pigeon coop and I distinctly remember checking like five times to make sure that I had the right ones. I tied the messages to them, double checked that they were secure, and then tossed them out the window."

"Oh boy," Karkat says. "I think I see where this is going."

"Well, they didn't fall if that's what you're thinking. They took off just fine. But when they were about thirty feet away I saw a flash of grey and a puff of feathers and then one of the pigeons was gone. And before I could figure out what had happened, there was another blur, and another puff of feathers, and a second one vanished. See, they have a falconer in Chorrol, and I didn't think to make sure she didn't have the count's prize falcon out. Because she did. And that falcon was really, really good at catching pigeons."

"Oops." Karkat says.

"Yeah, basically." You steal his mug and finish his ale for him.

"You're such a dick," he grumbles.

"Love you too." You reply, sliding the empty cup back to him. "Thankfully, one of them escaped, and we sent the other two letters to Weynon Priory, which actually between Chorrol and the Imperial City and asked them to forward them, so it wasn't a huge deal, but I still had to scrub chamber pots for a week after that."

"Oh, but you missed the best part." Jake says, smiling. "He came running to find me in tears because he was convinced he would be run out of the castle and have to live in the woods. I remember him saying something about having to eat worms and roots forever, but it was hard to be sure because he was sobbing so hard. The poor lad was completely distraught and it took me around ten minutes to calm him down enough to actually tell me what had happened."

"At least it got you to help," you say with a shrug.

"True. That was right about when I was beginning to be a real jerk, wasn't it?"
"Just about."

"Okay," Jade says, "So let me correct myself. All of the stories end with one of us almost dying, the death of an animal, or something burning down. That better?"

You scowl. "There's got to be one. Tell you what, I'll go get us another round and then we can try to remember what it is.

She sticks out her tongue. "Or you can just give up."

You stick yours out right back. "Come on, Jade, I thought you knew me better than that!" You gather up the mugs and head to the bar to get them filled and see if you can buy some food for yourself. You get the feeling that you might be here for a while.

And you're right. You've got a lot of catching up to do with Jake and Jane, and all four of you just feed off each other when you're in the same room. Karkat's obviously not quite feeling at home, but he's getting there. Or at least it seems like he's getting along pretty well. You try to include him when you can, but he knows less about life in Cyrodiil than you did about Skyrim before you came here, so it's kind of an uphill battle.

By the time you decide to head out, the tavern is almost empty and the hearth is burning low. You and Karkat say your goodbyes and head out. The night air is cool and brisk and the moons high in the sky. The two of you walk through the streets, his fingers intertwined with yours.

"So," you say nervously, "what did you think?"

"Your family is weird, but knowing you that's not surprising. And your cousins are nice. Even if Jake is completely wrong about centurions."

You laugh. "Well, that's something. To be honest I was a little worried."

"What? Were you expecting for me to trip over myself because of how ridiculously attractive all of them are? How it's mind-boggling that absolutely everyone related to you is so hot I'm amazed the house didn't spontaneously combust the moment you were all present inside it?"

"Uh…"

"Shit. That was a little much, wasn't it? Forget I said anything." He looks away and nibbles on his lower lip. Oh fuck he's cute.

"I was more afraid you wouldn't get along," you admit.

Karkat looks at you, eyebrow raised. "Huh? Why?"

"I mean, it's kind of important that your family gets along with your partner, or at least it sucks when that's not the case, right?"

Especially considering the circumstances…

Shut up! This is just between us!

"I guess so," Karkat answers, completely oblivious to your mental conversation. "Everyone was so tightly knit in the Gray Quarter that it was never really an issue before."

"What about with me?" You ask, possibly too quickly. "I mean, your dad only knew me for what, a day before we decided we wanted to start dating?"
“Oh, he liked you from the start,” he says, waving you off. "I could tell.”

“Didn’t seem like it,” you say. "You know he hardcore threatened me like the day after we kissed, right?”

Karkat snorts. “Yeah, but that was probably as covering-his-ass threatening. If he actually didn’t like you he would have let me know and I probably would have just stayed in Windhelm.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, by then I was really enjoying travelling with you and stuff, but dad’s a really good judge of character."

"What if he asked you to stop and come home now?"

Karkat smiles at you tenderly. "I thought I already told you: I'm with you until the end."

You let a sigh of relief. “Okay.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Oh, uh, just checking.”

He gives you a hard look for a moment, like he knows you’re up to something and is just trying to figure out what. But by then you’re practically at the house, so you keep walking and let yourself in. Lydia is waiting downstairs, mending one of her shifts. She looks up to address you as you enter.

"Ah, you have returned. I trust the others are settled in?"

"Yep!" you say, “It'll be just us tonight, okay?"

"Understood. Is there anything else you need?" She asks.

"Nah, thanks. We're just gonna hang out upstairs."

"Yeah, okay, now I’m sure you’re planning something," Karkat says.

You smile, trying not to look too nervous. "Just trust me, okay?"

He rolls his eyes. "If I had a Septim for every time I heard that one..."

"And how many times has it killed you?"

"That's not a good benchmark, John."

You ignore him and drag him to the bedroom.

As soon as you close the door Karkat’s on you. He throws his arms over your shoulders and kisses you, hard and hot. You’re taken a little by surprise, which gives him the opportunity to take full control. He presses you up against the door and bites your lower lip almost hard enough to draw blood. This wasn’t what you had in mind, but you’re not about to complain. You bury one hand in his hair and grip his waist with the other. He opens his mouth to deepen the kiss and you, loving soul you are, reciprocate so you can drink him down. Having his strong, compact frame against you is the best feeling in the whole fucking world, and he presses up against you with so much need and affection that you might actually die. One day it's gonna be enough that when he lets go
he pulls your heart right out of your chest. You can feel it.

But today is not that day so when the two of you come apart, both gasping for air, you manage to survive. Then he looks up at you through his eyelashes, light blush on his cheeks and lips slightly parted. Heat coils in your belly and your breath catches. Oh, you know that look. That is the "pick me up and throw me on the bed and have your way with me" look, and it's really fucking tempting. Absolute submission is a relatively rare thing to get from Karkat and he wears it so damn well…

It's not time for that, though. Not yet. So you push your desire back down in order to tease him instead. "Aww, did somebody get jealous because he didn't get enough attention today?"

Red spreads across his cheeks and he buries his face in your chest. His "Shut up" is a little muffled by your shirt.

"Oh gosh, I was kidding! Did it… did it really bother you that much?"

"I mean, it wasn't how I was planning for today to go," he grumbles, looking back up at you.

"Yeah, I guess that's kind of fair. Shit, if you didn't know who Jade was, that stuff at the stables must have looked awful."

"A little, yeah."

You brush your lips against his. "Don't worry. I'm almost more like her brother than Jake is."

"I know," he snarls.

"Shhh, it's okay. I'm just trying to say I'm yours." You stroke his spine and he melts into your touch. Okay, maybe you can get this back on track. "I love you so much. And you're absolutely amazing."

He smiles but shakes his head a little bit.

"I'm serious. You're smart, handsome, funny, loving, passionate-""

He kisses you again. "Divines and Daedra, I love you so much, John. Even if you do lay it on a bit thick sometimes."

He still doesn't get it. He doesn't think he deserves this. He thinks this is a joke or a game to you.

He still thinks that you're just going to leave.

No. Not allowed. And you're gonna squash that doubt once and for all.

"Close your eyes," you whisper.

“Shit, what are you up to?” He asks, but there’s a playful smile on his face, indicating that he’s still interested. He closes his eyes and waits.

“I think you’re g-gonna like it.” Fuck. You're such a goddamn dork. Well, at least your voice didn’t crack like a little kid's.

“John? Are you okay?” He scrunches up his eyebrows in concern, but keeps his eyes shut.

You try to steady your nerves. “Yeah. Just… one sec.”
He still looks slightly concerned, but you give him a quick reassuring kiss. He starts melting a little, like this was exactly what he was expecting, but you pull away before things get heated. There’ll be time for that later. Maybe. You hope.

You reach into one of your pouches and pull out the little bag you picked up in Windhelm. Gods, your hands are shaking so bad… But you manage to undo the drawstring and pull out the two rings.

They’re nearly identical, the same delicate silver filigrees set into gold bands, a combination of Dunmeri and Imperial traditions. The pattern is interrupted by a sapphire set into his ring and a ruby in yours and you thought it was cute at the time but now you’re uncertain. This is stupid and cheesy, isn’t it? What if he laughs at you? Thinks this is some kind of joke or, worse, what if he doesn’t want to-? You could stop now, pretend like nothing ever happened. But should you?

_Do you actually want my opinion?_

_No. Go away._

Miraak snorts. _It was an honest question, master._

He disappears, a sarcastic curl on the last word, just as Karkat asks “John? Seriously, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

In lieu of an answer, you lift one of his hands and set the rings in his open palm. His eyes pop open and he stares down at them while his free hand flies up to cover his mouth. He looks back up at you, an expression of pure shock on his face. Okay, you should say something.

You take a deep breath. “When we were in Blackreach, you told me I needed to do this properly or you might not agree. So here we go. Karkat, I love you more than anything. The two of us make a really, really great team and I wanna stay with you for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?”

You expected him to cry. You were hoping he’d say yes and jump into your arms, and you told yourself you’d be ready if he said no. But you weren’t prepared for him to look up at you mostly evenly but with just a bit of concern and ask, “Can you really do this?”

It throws you off your guard. “What do you mean?”

“You are!” You interject.

“I’m saying okay, if we accept that, I- I still don’t have any money or land or anything. I mean, dad’s doing okay now, but Kankri’s going to get what little he has. Shouldn’t you pick- or aren’t you supposed to get matched with-” he takes a deep breath. “Getting married to someone like me would ruin things for you and your family, wouldn't it?”

“Oh!” Is that what he’s worried about? You have to laugh. His face falls, probably thinking this is some sort of sick joke. So you smile at him and run your fingers through his hair. “Shh, no, Karkat. Shit, I shouldn't have laughed, sorry. But don't worry, it won’t ruin anything.”

“But I thought there was like a rule.”

You shake your head, still smiling. “Yeah, but that was before most of the houses had to disband. Like my options under that rule set are literally ‘second cousin’ or ‘wait for one of the few kids that isn't betrothed to turn sixteen.’ Since both of those are really fucking gross, and just about
everyone’s in that same boat, all that matters is I find someone competent.”

“Yeah, competent, and I… I have no idea how running a castle works.”

“Well I do. And I think you’re smart and organized enough to learn. If…” You take a deep breath. “If you don’t want to do this I understand. But trust yourself. And if you can’t do that, trust me, okay? This isn’t about what you think you can do, because I know you can do it. It’s about what you want to do.”

He swallows and looks back down at the rings. There are tears in his eyes, but it’s too early for you to tell if it’s good crying or bad crying. “Okay,” he croaks, his voice so thick with emotion it’s barely a whisper.

“Okay as in?” You don’t dare breathe. Akatosh, Arkay, Mara, Stendarr, whoever the hell just please…

“As in okay I’ll marry you, you fucking moron!”

You reach for each other at the same time. He starts crying into your chest, and you bury your face in his hair to hide the fact that you’re crying too.

Because that’s it. He’s yours. You get to keep him.

Your heart is swelling so much it stops up your throat and Karkat, your Karkat, is holding you like if he doesn’t you’ll float away. You feel like you almost could, so you squeeze him back tightly. Just to be sure.

“Shh, it’s okay,” you whisper. “I’m here.”

“I know!” he sobs.

Oh Mara he’s precious. He lets you lift him without a fuss, and even wraps his legs around your waist as you pull him up. You sit on the edge of the bed and stroke his hair, scratching that sensitive spot right at the top of his head. He nuzzles into you and yes, that is definitely good crying.

“Gods, I love you so much. I know you don’t like me calling you cute, but fuck it you’re my fiancé now,” the word feels weird on your tongue, and you’re not sure whether or not you actually like the title or if it just feels good to know he’s yours. “So you are so, so adorable.”

“I could take it back,” he grumbles.

“But will you?”

“…No.”

“Good.”

He sniffs and pulls his head back. “Ugh, I think you might have to burn this shirt.”

“Eh, acceptable losses,” you say.

He snorts, and okay, that was kind of gross. But you’ve seen worse. You hand him a handkerchief and he sets the rings down on the bedside table to blow his nose.

“Oh! And since you’re already crying I’ve got more for you.”
"What?" he asks with a sniffle.

You slide him off of your lap so you can get down on the floor. He looks at you with his head cocked to the side. You give him a brief smile before reaching under the bed. There you find the small chest Jake brought up, and you take out to plop on the bed right next to Karkat. He lifts his hand and holds it just over the lid. His fingers are trembling as he looks up at you for permission.

"Go on," you say, sitting down on his other side of the box.

He nods and opens it. "Holy shit this is nice," he murmurs as he pulls out your dark blue velvet doublet. Karkat strokes the material in awe, gently brushing the delicate golden embroidery with his fingertips.

"Yeah, just don’t get snot on that. It's a bitch to clean."

Karkat ignores you and keeps digging through the box. He pulls out the rest of your outfit and looks at all the pieces individually, though none get the attention the doublet did. (Interestingly, he’s almost more interested in the pants than the shirt, even though they’re only cotton. Weird.) Then he realizes the rest of what’s in there and his breath catches.

"Holy fuck, John, is this?-"

"For you? Yeah. I mean, if we’re gonna be showing you off to the countess you’ve gotta have something nice to wear."

His hands tremble and tears run down his cheeks as he takes out the bolt of crimson velvet. He touches it lightly, like he’s afraid he’s going to tear it. Then he pulls out silks, one black and one silver, and then finally the black cotton. He’s willing to play with the last bolt a bit more, tugging it ever so gently. Actually, come to think of it, everything up here has been linen, hasn't it? This might be even newer to him than the silk.

“I told Dad you seem to really like reds and blacks, but he actually picked out the colors,” you explain. “He was thinking that we could make you some clothes that are like mine, which is why he had that set up as a sample or in case there was like some fancy celebration thing at the end of this I’d need to dress up for. And it turns out that Adrianne’s little brother is a tailor and he knows how to do Colovian style stuff, but if you’d prefer it be more Nordic he can do that too. No one around here knows how to do Dunmeri style, but we could always head back to Windhelm first and-“

He throws himself back into your arms, and since you weren’t prepared he knocks you backwards so you’re lying flat on the bed. He’s kissing you again, and you bring your thumbs up to wipe his tears away.

"Gods," he whispers. "I love you so much. What the fuck did I do to deserve you?"

You laugh and roll over, taking him with you. "I mean, the saving my life a few dozen times probably helped."

His hands slide down your back to rest on your hips. “Fucking Oblivion, look at you…”

Like he’s not a sight himself: hair a mess, lips slightly swollen, eyes even redder than usual. He just looks so vulnerable like this. He traces gentle circles on your hipbone and you kiss him again. He opens his mouth, inviting you to deepen the kiss. You hope that you never get over how cute it is that Karkat gets off on romance. When you pull back his eyes are glazed over and he looks lost in thought.
“Writing the story of your life in your head again?” You whisper in his ear.

He blushes. “Shut up.”

“Ssh, it’s fine, baby. I’ll help. ’Karkat was still reeling as John kissed him all over. He had been so used to thinking of himself as lesser, but now his lover was offering him everything he had, a full and equal partnership for the rest of their lives. John had already given him so much that night, and Karkat wanted to give him everything in return.’”

“…Okay that’s fucking scary.”

“Really? Was it too much? I would have thought you’d enjoy that.”

“No, it’s uncanny because I’d just been thinking…” he trails off and goes bright red before he can actually admit to anything. “Dammit, John, wipe that grin off your face and get to the part where you fuck me!”

You have to bury your face in his shoulder for a moment. You just can’t stop smiling because so cute! You think you're gonna like this.

But after a few moments you compose yourself enough to pull away to start putting the clothing back in the chest. Karkat stands behind you and wraps his arms around your middle to undo your belt. As soon as the knot comes free he pulls away, putting your things gently on the table in the corner. You hear some clinking as he gets rid of his as well. By the time you get the box stowed back under the bed he’s settled down in the middle of the mattress, shoes and socks gone. It takes a few moments of fumbling with your own boots before you’re barefoot and climbing back over him.

Oh, it’s so much nicer like this, being able to lie down and feel every inch of his body beneath yours. You grind down against him, because hello dick this is not a false alarm and you need to do the thing. It catches on quick when Karkat grabs your ass and rolls his hips up against yours. Heh, if the extra pressure on your thigh is any indication it feels like he’s right there with you in bonerland. Knowing he’s excited makes you even more excited, which has a similar effect on him, and the two of you work each other up until you’re making out furiously, both rock hard and writhing against each other. And it’s so good you don’t want to stop, but at the same time you need more. You need skin on skin contact right this second.

Thankfully, Karkat’s either a mind-reader or every bit as horny as you are. He grabs the hem of your shirt and pulls it up over your head. You quickly pick apart the lacing of his tunic and it falls back, pooling around him. He gasps as you tug his shift up out of his pants. Ooh, he looks nice like this too, breathing heavily with his chest bared and dick straining to get free. You wish you could save the moment forever. But then you wouldn’t get that skin on skin contact, would you? So instead you undo the drawstring on his pants and help him shimmy out of them. He brings his shift all the way up over his head and then goes for you. You shiver in the wake of his fingers as he shoves your pants down and then drags your shift up. Just a little more wiggling and both of you are completely bare.

“John, just fucking look at you…” he traces a finger down your jaw. “You’re gorgeous.”

He’s one to talk, staring up at you open mouthed, eyes glazed over with lust. Gods you love his face: the cute rounded nose, slightly pointed chin, thick eyebrows, perfect for showing off his overabundance of emotion. The thick tendons in his neck and his voicebox show clearly as he strains up towards you. You run your hands down him, past his strong shoulders, over his flat chest. Your fingers trace every scar, each mark from a fight that made him the amazing elf he is
today. You go down over his firm belly too, trace the trail of dark hair under his navel, but divert sideways before you reach his cock. You know he wants to be touched, that he’s waiting for you, but you’re not done playing yet. So instead your hands settle on the gentle curve of his hips.

He’s apparently done with just looking because he grabs you by the shoulders and pulls himself back up to claim your lips. As always, kissing naked is even better than kissing through clothes. He spreads his legs and lets you settle between them, the thin hair on his upper thighs tickling your sides a little bit. You pull away from his mouth to bite and lick at his shoulders and neck. The marks from a few days ago are still there, but they’re starting to fade. Can’t have that. He wraps his legs around your waist and whines, rubbing up against you.

“What is it?” you tease, pulling away and petting his belly in a way you know drives him crazy.

“More,” he begs.

“Hmmm… okay.”

He rolls his eyes at you, but he’s also practically humping the air, so it can’t have been too much of a problem. You reach for the bedside table and then catch sight of the rings. Hmm, you’re pretty sure he’d like it if… You take his and slide it onto his finger.

“John? What are-“

“Gotta make sure it fits,” you reply cheerfully.

He stares at his hand, transfixed for a moment. You slide your ring on the wrong hand, so that they’ll be together when your fingers are intertwined. You get back up onto your knees, getting rid of your glasses and then going into the bedside table for the bottle of slick. The room fills with the scent of herbs the moment you pull the cork out. Karkat licks his lips.

“How do you want to do this?” You ask softly.

“I thought I was making it obvious,” he breathes, moving so that your cock is right next to his entrance. “I want you inside of me.”

You groan. “Love hearing you say it, though.”

The oil tingles where it touches your fingers. You can’t help but gasp, remembering how amazing it feels anywhere more intimate. When you start reaching down Karkat begrudgingly lets go of your waist to give your hand better access. You trace the vein on the bottom of Karkat’s cock as consolation and he moans.

“Is it that good?” you ask.

“No, it’s fucking better!”

“Aww, I’m almost a little bit jealous.” You slide your hand further down, brushing the material on his balls and taint before gently circling his entrance. He’s not looking. His eyes are closed and his head thrown back from the combination of your touch and the slick. “But then again, I’m really liking the idea of fucking your brains out right now. Lovingly. With love.”

He lets out a breathy chuckle. “You tack that on to try to keep the romantic mood?”

“No. I mean it,” You gently start easing one finger in. “I donno, man. I want you more than anything. And for part of me that means holding you close and kissing you and never letting you
go and for part of me that means pounding you until you can’t walk tomorrow.”

He sighs pleasantly and gives you a pleased but hungry look. “I like both. Both is good.”

“See, that’s what I thought.”

You curve your finger, trying to remember where… He gasps sharply and arches off the bed. Okay, apparently there. You stroke the spot lightly a few more times, and he relaxes enough for you to get another finger in. He’s so hot and so tight and you can’t wait to get inside.

“There you go, Karkat,” you murmur, petting his belly with your free hand ”You’re doing so good!”

He grabs your shoulders and pulls you down for a kiss. You start gently thrusting and spreading your fingers, drinking down the sounds that pour out of his throat as you do. Every now and then you make sure to brush up against that spot. Not too much, you don't want him at the edge too early, but he always shudders so nicely, lets out such pretty moans. What kind of man could resist that?

“I love you,” he whispers. “I love you more than all the stars in the sky. More than- hng!- more than all the water in the oceans.”

And it’s so cheesy, so cliché, but so Karkat you don’t even care. You gently ease a third finger inside and he almost loses it. His heart is racing. You feel it around your fingers and against your chest and he’s panting in your ear like he does at the end of a fight.

“Fucking oblivion! Take me, John, please. I need you.”

His tone makes your heart ache. You want to give him everything in the world, and at the very least you need to give him what he wants. You swallow hard. “Not yet, baby. Just a little more. I have to take good care of you, okay? We both know it’ll hurt if I hurry.”

He huffs but lets you keep working at him. You pull away for a second and Karkat whines at the loss, but then you come back with more oil on your fingers and he bucks up against you. His precome rubs against your belly, wet and warm. He digs his nails into your back, pulling you back down. The angle is awkward and you know your wrist is gonna cramp but you don’t fucking care because you have a ludicrously hot Karkat writhing under you. You need more. You need more than your tongue or your fingers or even your cock inside of him. You need to melt into him, fuse into one being and never let go.

“I’m yours,” he breathes against your lips. “All yours. Every –ah!- every fucking inch of me is all yours.”

“Mine,” you agree as you slide your fingers away again.

It’s time. He’s spread and waiting for you. You pour a little more oil onto your fingers and take a deep breath, reading yourself before you actually try to slick yourself up. The second you make contact it’s like being hit by lightning, except the shocks that run up your spine are invigorating instead of painful. You pump your dick a few times, thoroughly coating it in the slick. Oh fuck and moving like this is so-

“John!” Karkat whines, pulling you out of your trance.

“Heh, sorry.”
“I know it’s good, but it’s better once you get inside, remember?” He wraps his legs back up around your waist.

“Like I could ever forget,” you murmur. You line yourself up ever so carefully and begin easing in.

Fuck, he's always so hot, so tight. You just want to shove yourself in, to take and take until he has nothing left to give. Part of you thinks he'd like it. He's gasping and moaning, fingernails digging into your back as he arches off the bed into you. But no, maybe some other time. You just got engaged and you’re keeping this gentle and sweet. You need him to feel how loved he is, how precious he is, and how amazing he makes you feel. His face is a fantastic shade of red and you lean down to place gentle kisses across his cheeks, over the bridge of his nose, down his neck.

"You're being so good," you murmur, "Always so good for me."

"Fuck-!" He chokes out.

"How's it feel?" you ask, easing a little further in. "Because you feel amazing from up here. If topping is as good for you as it is for me, it's no wonder you had so much fun ruining me back in Windhelm."

"Hard to say what's better." He wets his lips. "But fuck, I need a minute."

"Anything for you," you murmur, kissing him ever so softly, like every ounce of you isn’t begging to plow into him.

His whole body shudders and god that feels amazing. You've got about an inch and a half left. Fuck, you need it so bad! But you'll wait. You'd wait for centuries if he asked. But he won't. You know he won't. And he doesn't.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath. "Okay."

"Yessssss," you hiss as you slide all the way home.

"Fucking nine, I can't with you!"

You laugh and he gasps, arching up into you even more.

"You okay?"

"Not if you just sit there! Fuck me!"

"No," you say. "I'm gonna make love to you."

And because it's Karkat, it works. He makes the most adorable, happy-surprised face and embraces you tightly. He breathes your name and wiggles his hips a little. Gods you love your little nerd. You give him one last kiss on the forehead and start moving. You’d started to adjust to having the slick on your skin, but now with every thrust you get another surge of pleasure, the already amazing feeling of being inside your lover enhanced by whatever’s in the oil.

"Gods, I love you so much," he chokes out. "Fuck, John. I can't- can't believe you're mine… forever."

"Forever," you confirm. You try out a few different angles. You do this so rarely it's hard to find where exactly he wants you. “Karkat, where’s-“

“A little to the right.” You try. “No, wait, my right your left.”
You roll your eyes but go for the new angle. Karkat lets out a long drawn-out groan and scratches down your back. There we go. You try a few more experimental thrusts, earning a breathy moan each time.

"Fuck yes!" Karkat keens, arching up into you.

The new position makes moving so much easier, and you quickly set a pace that’s as slow as you can bring yourself to go but still a little faster than you’d really like. You close your eyes and let yourself enjoy the feeling of him tight and wet around you, the rest of his body pressing against you like he can’t get enough, the jolts of pleasure running down your spine and making your fingers and toes tingle.

“I get to keep this,” he breathes. “Fuck, John, you fit so well. On me, in me, I don’t care. It’s like you’re fucking made for me.”

His words cut right through the growing physical pleasure and head straight to your heart. Without stopping, you lift your right hand and tuck a strand of hair behind his ear. The ruby in your ring glints in the candlelight. “Can’t wait to take you home. I’m gonna spoil you rotten.”

“We’ll see if gold-digging is as good as my dad says,” he says teasingly.

“Baby, I’m gonna make it even better. Whatever you want.”

“You. You, John, always you.”

And that, oh that just gets you. Your entire body shudders. You feel your cock twitch, like you’re not already balls-deep in the best lover anyone could ever ask for. You have to pause for a second and bury your face in his shoulder.

“John? Are you okay?”

“If you keep talking like that I’m gonna blow after two minutes.”

He lets out a breathy laugh. “And you tease me for being romantic!” he runs his fingers through your hair. He lets his voice go all low and sultry. “You can do whatever you want. You’ve already given me so much today.”

You start back up again. He might think that now, but he needs more, deserves more. And you’re gonna give it to him, gods dammit. He grips you tightly with his arms, his legs, gods even his insides feel like they’re trying to cling, to keep pulling you further in until you can’t move. You feel every moan as it reverberates through his chest and into yours. He rolls his hips to match each thrust as you slowly, methodically try to show him how amazing he really is.

The light slap of skin on skin is barely audible over Karkat’s near constant moans and whimpers. There’s a definite slickness on your belly where it rubs over his cock. You wonder briefly if it feels anything like thigh-fucking with how close you’re pressed together. Well, it’s probably a little bit different since he’s only got your soft belly on one side and he can’t really rub against himself. Still, he seems to like it if the high whining and wiggling is any indication. It’s his turn to bury his face in your shoulder. For a few moments he just presses his lips and nose against your skin, but then you feel the sharpness of his teeth as he sinks into your muscle. You almost expect him to tear off a chunk of flesh, but the pressure is going straight to your cock.

“Shit… Karkat…” You wish you could be more eloquent, but Karkat’s melted too much of your brain. There’s nothing you can do but keep fucking him, giving him what he wants.
Karkat loosens his jaws and begins just mouthing at the bite. It’s like he’s trying to kiss it better but can’t quite get together the dexterity to do it. After a few moments you realize he’s making noises, little strained words. And then you realize it’s just one word: your name. He’s saying it over and over so reverently, like a prayer. It’s all you can do to not come right then and there.

You thread your fingers through his hair and gently pull him back. He’s panting so hard and has a little bit of drool on the corner of his mouth. “John…” he whispers one more time, staring up at you in adoration.

You lean down and kiss him. Well, sort of. It’s honestly more just breathing into each other’s mouths as your tongues try to do… something. But you don’t care. You don’t care what he does because you feel like you’re drowning in him. He screams into your mouth and his body shudders against yours, tightening around your cock. He shakes once, twice, three times, and you feel more wetness spreading over your belly. Oh there it is. You start to slow down.

“No,” he says. He threads your fingers together. It feels weird with the rings in the way, but damn it looks good. “Keep going. Come inside of me.”

Well, how do you say no to that? You pick up the pace, pushing yourself up for better leverage. He’s so pliant now, almost loose as you keep thrusting into him, except for the occasional little tremor. And he’s smiling at you so sweetly, so serenely. You feel the heat in your belly coiling ever tighter. Your thrusts start to stutter, your coordination failing you.

“Oh, John,” he whispers. “Come for me.”

And you do. You whine his name as every muscle in your body tightens and you spill your load into him. Then everything melts.

You manage to roll off of him before you go completely limp. Your fingers are still intertwined, the metal and gems shimmering in the dull light.

When you find your tongue again, your first words are a breathless “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he says back. He nuzzles up to you, buries his face in the crook of your neck.

It’s all you can do to just hold each other for a while. You’re kind of absently petting his back while he just rests against your chest.

“How do you feel?” you ask after a while.

“Fucking amazing,” he murmurs.

“You look fucking amazing too,” you say. Because he does, eyes sleepy and a little glazed over, hair an absolute wreck, lips slightly swollen. You must have thought it a million times over the course of the night, but it’s true. But your complement seems to snap him out of it. He blinks at you and then blushes a little. Of course, that’s not a bad look either. You don’t remember it starting out that way, but at some point he became the most beautiful creature you’ve ever seen.

“Let’s… let’s get cleaned up.” He pushes himself up off your chest.

“I can take care of it if you want,” you say.

“No. You… you’ve done enough for me today.” He turns away from you to go to the washbasin, but you still see the huge grin on his face when he looks down at his ring.
You let yourself lie down and relax, content in the feeling that you did, in fact, do good.

Chapter End Notes

John's outfit is based on the Colovian Noble Clothes mod: http://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/77405/? but instead of a loose vest it's got a more structured doublet (so closer to the female model) and without the fur. I couldn't find an image on google real quick that matched the picture in my head, so you can fill in some of the blanks.
The bethesda conference is tonight. Pray for me.

And, in the meantime, enjoy the eleventh hour episode, even if it is a bit later in the day than usual.

The next morning is perfect. You awake to the sun streaming in through the shutters, bathing the bedroom in a golden glow. Karkat’s curled up against you, still snoozing with his head tucked under your chin. You close your eyes again and stroke his hair, tangling your fingers in his messy curls. Then you go a little lower, tracing down his spine.

At times like this you’re grateful that elves sleep more than humans. It gives you a good uninterrupted half hour where you can enjoy having a completely unguarded Karkat all to yourself. You tip your head down, burying your face in his hair to give him a little kiss and revel in his scent. Your heart feels swollen and every thought that crosses your mind is about the love and pleasure you feel. People like to throw around the phrase “better than sex” for anything good, but here it actually applies. Because sex is awesome, but there’s something about just holding him like this that gives you a sense of closeness and intimacy even greater than the one you get when you’re inside of him or vice versa.

Eventually biology gets the better of you and you have to pry yourself away to pee. And as long as you’re dealing with annoying stuff your body needs (Ah yes, Miraak says, having a physical form must be such a burden for you. Really, you shouldn’t have fought me at all. I would have been doing you a favor. Yeah, okay, shut up.) you take the time to wash up and then go down for breakfast. Lydia’s nowhere to be found, so you just sit quietly by yourself, nibbling on some bread with jam and listening to the bustle of the city outside.

Karkat joins you just as you’re debating whether or not to go back upstairs and risk waking him for the sake of more cuddles. He slides onto the bench beside you and then snuggles up, going so far as to wrap his ankle around yours.

“Hi there,” you murmur.

He makes a positive sound and turns to kiss you, chaste but drawn-out, almost a little lazily.

“Mmm, I like sleepy Karkat.”

“Yeah, like the way I catch you ogling me in the mornings didn’t give that away a long time ago.”

You laugh. “Guilty as charged.”

He smiles back at you. “Seriously, I’m pretty sure one of these days I’m gonna wake up with my dick in your mouth.”
“I mean, if you're interested you just have to ask.”

His face goes bright red and he snags a piece of bread as an excuse to break eye contact. “I’ll think about it.”

He’s so cute you find yourself laughing again. You close your eyes and set your head on his shoulder. Yeah, this is good. This is really good.

“We should go to Jorvaskarr today,” he says, changing the subject. “We need to see who’s shown up.”

“Yeah! I wonder if Aradia or Vriska are here, I wouldn’t mind hanging out with them for a while.”

“Do you think your cousins will mind us leaving them alone all day?”

You shrug. “They’re big kids. They can take care of themselves. And if they come asking we’ll have Lydia tell them where we are.”

He looks relieved. He spent all of yesterday with your family, so it's only fair he you spend today with his friends. The two of you take your time getting ready and swing past the market to pick up a few jugs of wine to share with everybody. You try to ignore your nervousness, because you know it's dumb. But you can't help but worry they'll think of you too much like an outsider. You try to remind yourself that they’re nice enough and a number of them seem to like you.

As you enter the dimly-lit hall, you find more Dunmer than you were expecting. Nepeta sits in the middle of a long table, talking to Terezi and Feferi. Tavros is on her other side, shifting uncomfortably as Vriska laughs loudly at some joke you can't hear. Apparently it’s awful because Eridan rolls his eyes dramatically. They're all gathered on one side of the hall while most of the Nords sit on the other, giving them strange looks. Nepeta glances up and smiles at the two of you.

"Hey guys! I was wondering when you'd grace us with your purr-esence!"

"How long have you guys been here?" Karkat asks.

"Well, Eridan, Feferi and I showed up last night," Vriska says, running her fingers through her hair. "Terezi got here the day before and Tavros just made it this morning. Anyway, it's gr-eight to see you two." Nepeta giggles.

"Oh Stendarr, are you getting in on the pun shit too?" He groans. "Make sure to remind me to stab myself in the eardrums."

"Oh, don't be so glub, Karkrab!" Feferi says.

"Yeah, that sounds like it would be paw-sitively clawful!"

Karkat turns to Eridan with an exasperated look on his face. "Kill me now."

"Why don't you come sit with us?" Eridan offers, quickly changing the subject. "What've you guys been up to after ya ran off?"

"Oh Azura, what haven't we been up to?" Karkat sighs.

"Donno," Vriska says. "Come tell us!"

Everyone scoots a little closer on the benches to make room for you and Karkat. Yeah, you definitely feel like a plus one here. At least now when the conversation slips into that weird
Dunmeri-Cyrodilic mix they all use with each other you can sort of follow along, even if you don't get why some of the jokes are funny. Although, to be fair, given some of the reactions, they probably weren't that good in the first place, so you tell yourself that's probably okay.

Everyone seems pretty excited that you and Karkat went to Solstheim. You guess it makes sense. Going someplace where Dunmer are the majority would probably feel like a nice change for most of them. Karkat takes full advantage of the chance to brag about both of you, but he manages not to let the whole Daedra thing slip. The only downside is the running commentary from Miraak, who is steadfastly trying to maintain the shreds of his dignity. Just like when you talked to Mr. Vantas. Ugh. But, hey, he left you alone most of last night so you can't really ask for much more. At some point Equius comes in from the forge and you have to put two tables together so there's room for everyone. Then Vriska goes back to dominating the conversation, talking about all of the high-risk heists she's been pulling off now that the guild is back in Nocturnal's favor.

"You really ought to be pickier about your targets," Terezi says, frowning.

"What do you mean?" Vriska asks.

"Well, when you first joined the guild you were always so focused on only stealing from people who deserved it, corrupt authorities beyond the reach of the law and things like that."

She shrugs. "Come on, it's not like anyone gets rich fairly. There's always something bad involved somewhere back down the line."

"You can't hold people responsible for things their ancestors did generations ago," Terezi points out. "I mean, look at your own family for Azura's sake."

She flips her hair. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, Pyrope."

The door swings open and Sollux and Kanaya stroll in. Huh, looks like it got dark out there. When did that happen?

"Lovely to see so many of you here already," Kanaya says sweetly.

"Did you have something in mind fur us?" Nepeta asks.

"No, just glad to be free of annoying-ass vampires," Sollux grumbles. "Present company excluded."

Kanaya snorts.

"Wait, you knew Rose and Kanaya were vampires the whole time and you didn't even tell me?!" Karkat demands as Sollux slides onto the bench.

He shrugs. "It's not my fault you're thicker than a castle wall. I mean, they're not exactly too focused on hiding it. Besides, what do you think those two eat? Most of us take turns being dinner like once a month."

"So the Archmage really is a vampire?" Eridan asks, narrowing his eyes. "I knew there was somethin fishy goin on there."

"Hey, you guys might have fur-got, but purr-haps it's not the best idea to say the v word so loudly," Nepeta whispers. "I mean, the companions are supposed to be monster hunters."

"True, but since the lot of you are werebeasts, I doubt you have much room to talk," Kanaya pulls
up a at the end of the table.

"How did you learn of this?!!" Equius demands.

She props her chin up on the back of her hand. "Have you breathed in here recently? It smells of a proper magical menagerie. At least there's some variety. When Dave would come every month or so to pick up blood potions our chambers reeked of wet dog for days just from the second-hand exposure."

"Oh, Meowra, could you imagine me as a dog? That would be clawful…"

"Perhaps then you could stop with these ridiculous cat puns," Equius complains.

"Purrhaps!"

He puts his head down in defeat.

It's the middle of the night by the time you get home. Both of you are pleasantly buzzed, holding hands just because you can and kissing when you think no one's looking. Not that anyone would really care – most of the people in the neighborhood know you're a couple – but you're pretty sure Karkat just likes feeling like he's getting away with something.

You get to the door and put your key in the lock only to find it was already open. That's weird; Lydia is always asleep by this time and she's good at locking up. You and Karkat exchange looks and then silently enter the house.

The floorboards upstairs creak and you can see candlelight flickering down from where your housecarl should be sleeping. You can hear quiet murmurs but can't make anything out. It doesn't sound like Lydia's cadence, though. Karkat takes his old sickles from the rack near the door and sneaks up the stairs. He barely makes a sound as he climbs. You hold back until he's at the top, not wanting to alert the intruders to your presence too early. Then he motions for you to follow, and you do your best to move quietly.

When you're nearly at the landing, Karkat reaches for the door to Lydia's room. He throws it open, freezes, and then slams it back shut. You look at him in confusion. Okay then… Behind the door you hear frenzied shuffling and a low curse. Wait, you recognize that voice. What is Jade doing here? You step forward and reach for the handle, but Karkat grabs your wrist before you can make contact. His face is so red it practically glows in the dim light.

"Don't open it," he says, refusing to make eye contact. "Just give them a minute."

Jade, the flustered look on Karkat's face, the fact he said them… It all falls into place. Embarrassment and anger and a little bit of disgust writhe in your stomach along with the general feeling of “oh, Akatosh, why?”

Miraak gives you the mental equivalent of an eye roll.

Oh yes, All-Maker forbid that anyone else break your monopoly on sexuality.

But it's Jade!

Ah yes, sorry. How dare one of your kin act on the same sort of thoughts and desires as you are wont to?

Shush with your logic! I'm trying to be traumatized!
But he's right, even if you don't want to admit it. Yeah, okay, keep perspective. Perspective is good. Miraak fades back into your subconscious with an air of smug contentment.

"Fuck!" Jade hisses from behind the door. "I never should have let you talk me into this!"

"How was I supposed to know they’d come home this early?" Dave demands. "It's only like one."

"That's not early! You should know that mister time guy!"

He say something in reply, but you can't make it out. That might be for the best, going by the indignant noise that Jade lets out. During the short conversation you and Karkat just exchange glances, at a loss for what to do.

A moment later Jade opens the door. She's blushing so hard it looks like she'll burst a blood vessel. Her dress was thrown on hastily, the lacing sloppy, uneven, and just loose enough for you to tell she's not wearing anything under it. Don't think about, John. Just try not to think about it- fuck, like that ever works.

"Crap, John, I'm so sorry," she says. "I forgot to tell you we were coming back, didn't I?"

"Yep."

She pushes her hair back. "Shit, I meant to bring this up last night. I just got so distracted sometimes! Is it… is it okay for us to stay here for a little while? It's just – and I know this is stupid, but it's Rose's rule, not mine – but if Dave and Dirk are dating and their partners are around they're not allowed to sleep in the same building."

"Are you serious?" You ask. "I mean, yeah you can stay, but that sounds a little…” Fake? Contrived? Like a bullshit excuse Dave made up to keep tormenting you since he had so much fun with it in Solstheim? None of them quite fit, so you just let the sentence drift off.

"Sorry Dirk's so competitive." You hear Dave say.

"Yep, sure you have nothing to do with it," Jade replies sarcastically.

"Come on, I am a saint. In religions that aren't practiced anymore, but it still counts. And besides, Dirk really did start it."

Without thinking, you peer around her to look at Dave. He's sitting cross-legged on Lydia's bed. Stark naked. And oh, okay, you get what Jade was talking about yesterday now. Yep. Okay.

"Hi there." He says, raising an eyebrow at you.

"Fuck! Sorry!" you look away and cover your eyes.

Jade laughs at you. "Oh my gods, your face!" Karkat must have glared at her or something because then she goes. "I'm uh, sorry you had to catch us like this."

"Yeah, uh… Can we just agree to not do… anything? Like as long as we're both here?"

"Of course! I wasn't planning to, it's just-"

"Right." You don't want to hear any more of that sentence, thank you very much.

"Um, okay. Anyway, I'll, uh see you tomorrow," she says. "Goodnight?"
"Yeah. Night."

She closes the door.

"Hey," Dave says, "Does stuff include eating?"

"Dave!"

"Not eating out! I mean literally my fangs plus your neck. Like not now because embarrassment tastes awful, but I was thinking we could maybe-"

You walk back across the hall to your room. Yeah, you don't want to hear this either. Karkat follows without a word. He closes the door behind you, throws his clothes off, and then flops onto the bed. He growls to himself and rubs his eyes with the heel of his palm.

"You okay?" you ask.

"No, life is awful and unfair."

"I mean, yeah it's awkward, but it could have been worse," you say, starting to unlace your tunic.

"No I- can I be honest with you for a second?"

Your heart sinks. "Uh, yeah. W-what is it?"

He looks at you, eyes weary and frowning slightly. "I haven't felt like this since I was like fifteen, but everyone is hot and I have no idea what to do with myself."

He says it so seriously that you just burst out laughing.

"John! Stop being a dick!"

"Gods, I thought this was gonna be an actual problem!" You kick off your pants and snuggle up next to him.

"It is an actual problem!" he protests.

"Nah. There's not much you can do about being attracted to people. It won't be easy, but I volunteer to let you take any frustrations out on me." You kiss him on the temple.

"Pfft, how noble of you."

"I know, right?"

"Such a selfless giver. Which is, of course, why you're clinging to me like a baby troll to its mother."

"Exactly."

He groans and runs his fingers through your hair. "What am I going to do with you, you giant doofus?"

"I mean, you said you were gonna marry me last night."

"Hmm, I guess I did," he says, cupping the side of your face.

"Wait," you hear Jade say through the wall, "You what?!"
Well, Jade knows you're engaged now. And because she panicked and ran over, Dave panicked and ran over. And then you spent the next hour sitting on your bed in your fucking underwear while John tried to prove he's thought the whole marriage thing through and instead proved that he somehow managed to over-think everything and be completely clueless at the same time. This is going to be the theme of the rest of your life isn't it? Great.

Dave sits there for a while, pretending to be as unattached as possible. But you know he's filing away information. Probably to tell the entire city that you're idiots. Well, joke's on him; that shit's self-evident. At least once he realized it wasn’t an actual emergency he went back to the other room for a minute to put clothes back on.

You were just really hoping the news about your engagement would wait to break until you were about to head off to Sovngarde so your friends wouldn't have the time to taunt you relentlessly about the fact that you're only nineteen. And they'd do all this even though they completely ignored the fact that Kanaya, who is a full elf on top of it, married Rose at seventeen. Because your friends are dicks.

Then, in a moment of brilliance, John remembers that yesterday the Egberts had decided they would have a big sparring match tomorrow where he and Jade would be going against Jane and Jake. He makes a solid pitch to Jade that if they want to stand any sort of chance of winning they need to get some sleep. You're not sure she's convinced, and to be honest you're not sure you're convinced, but you're all about to fall over so you agree to call it a night.

It's late afternoon when you finally roll out of bed. Dave is still asleep, of course, but you just leave him in Lydia's room. John and Jade gather their gear and the three of you head out into the countryside. Even though she's a sorceress, Jade still carries a knife and crossbow with her for backup. Her armor is a thing of beauty. It's made of black leather layered like scales and crackling with magic. It covers her from her shoulders to upper thighs, but she has nothing on her arms or legs. Instead she wears bright green robes under the armor, doubling up on the enchantment, but they'd do nothing to protect her against any sort of weapon. But she's not like you, if she's within striking distance something’s already gone horribly, terribly wrong. She’s supposed to stand back, shoot spells, and keep John healed up so he can take the hits for her. It might be a little mean, but you can’t help but wish it was the other way around, that she’d be shielding him from danger.

Yeah, they've fought a billion times, and, yeah, John can take a hit, but you still can't help but worry. Sparring is always a little bit dangerous, and this is all happening so last minute. If any of them get seriously injured they won't have time to recover and you’ll all be fucked. You haven't seen any of the other three in action, but the way John talks about them they're all serious forces to be reckoned with. When you left the house, you brought all the healing potions you had. You just hope it'll be enough...

Jake and Jane are waiting for you just outside city limits. Jane doesn’t look ready for a fight. She wears a simple blue tunic and appears to be completely unarmed, but you're not fooled. Her real gear must be like John's, just waiting for her word to come into existence. Jake wears leather armor that would be completely unremarkable if it weren't black. You're not sure what his deal is, but you know it can't be as normal as it looks. He's got a couple of daggers hanging from his belt, along with a pair of weird rectangular dwemer artifacts.

"Ooh, you get some new toys, Jake?" John asks, bounding over to him.

Jake smirks and pulls out one of the dwemer things, holding it by a leather-wrapped bit jutting out from one of the long sides. "You could say that."
"What does it do?" he asks.

"Watch, this is cool," Jade says, elbowing John gently.

Jake takes a small square piece of stone from one of his pouches and slides it into a slot near one of the object’s ends. Then he holds the thing so it's pointing out towards an abandoned stone wall. There's a blast of light from the end of the object. Glowing green patterns run up the arm holding the artifact.

"Okay…?" You say.

"Look over there." Jade points to the wall.

It's then that you notice the hole. It's perfectly round and only about the size of your thumbnail, but you can see daylight through it. Through the four foot thick stone wall. And he's gonna be swinging that thing around and shooting at both of them. If John tries to get close…

"I don't think this is a good idea," you say. "We should go home."

John rolls his eyes. "It's fine, dad. Anyway, what are those, Jake?"

"It's called a B'ztel. Quite a lovely little thing, isn't it?" He holds it out to let John inspect it.

"Holy shit this is awesome." John takes it and holds it like Jake did.

"Isn't it just the bee's knees?" Jake asks excitedly. "Can't let you shoot it, sadly. Lets out a horribly nasty bit of backfire. I did a good number on my hands a few times before I got the dispersion enchantment for this armor right."

"How does it work?" John asks. "Like I know it's magic, but what kind?"

Jake all but vibrates with excitement. "It uses Aetherium to bend magical energy into a sort of projectile. Dirk and I actually found a couple of these buried in an Aylied ruin of all places, even though they're clearly of dwarven make. He took one of them apart and we managed to discover that-"

"Please save some secrets for the fight," Jane says. She’s smiling, but you can see a clear competitive edge to it. "Wouldn't want to take all the thrill of discovery away from them."

"Oh alright," Jake replies, scowling. John hands the B'ztel back and Jake holsters it.

"Now that that's over with," Jane says, "let's hear the rules."

"Come on," John whines. "Do we really need to-"

"Now," she demands.

The other three roll their eyes and then recite in unison, "No chaos magic, no headshots or anything else you can't fix, no undersummoning, and no dark or illegal magics."

"And the 'you' in question is?"

"Us individually, not Jane."

"Good." She smiles sweetly at her cousins.
You’re not even sure where to start with all that. Like no headshots is good, but ‘dark and illegal magics?’ Maybe it’s better if you don’t ask about that. Or how all of these rules came to be. But you’re still curious, so you turn to John and ask, “What’s undersummoning?”

"Oh, that's what we call it, anyway," he replies. "Not sure if there's a real name for it. It doesn’t seem to come up in books. But it’s kind of a neat trick! Jane, wanna demonstrate with me?"

"Sure!" She holds out her hand and a strange staff trident staff thing appears. The pole is mostly blue and the lumpy tines are red, but before you get too good of a look at it, it vanishes and reappears in John's hand.

"What? How did you do that?!!" you demand.

"I mean," he says, letting the weapon fade back into the ether. "It's not like when you conjure something it just pops into existence. Daedra, weapons, they all have to come from somewhere. So undersummoning is like yanking it away by trying to call it up a second time. Taking someone else's main weapon is a massive dick move, and anyway it could wind up in a spiritual tug of war and we…” he glances nervously at Jane.

"It's fine," she replies. "All that really matters is we'd rather not have to deal with the possibility of having to weigh claims of legal versus daedric inheritance. And as John clearly has the former, we want to avoid testing the latter."

"Anyway, now that that’s done with," Jake says. "I think it's about that time then. I’d like to get back to town before nightfall."

They take their places, facing each other from about thirty yards apart. You're more or less an equal distance from both teams, but a few paces back from the center so you don’t get caught in the cross-fire.

"This far enough for you?" Jade yells, "Or do you want us all the way back in Whiterun?"

"It's fine, sister! My aim isn't quite that good!" Jake replies.

"Wanna count us down, Karkat?" John calls.

No. Really you don't. "Sure. Three, two, one, go!"

Nobody moves, but the change in the air is almost palpable. Jake lifts his hand and he and Jane vanish. Shit, where'd they go?! You stare towards John, praying that nothing bad happens to him. His eyes are closed and he stands with hands hanging relaxed at his sides like there's not a pair of invisible death machines coming for him. Everything is still for a few moments, then his eyes burst open. He summons his armor and hammer and leaps to the right in a split second. Jane reappears at the contact, blocking his hammer with the poll of her trident. Or at least you assume it's Jane. She's wearing armor nearly identical to John's, except for the fact that the places where the plates come together are a pale blue.

"Nice," she says, voice slightly muffled by the helmet. "Is that dragonborn magic?"

"No, actually it's-"

"John, look out!" Jade calls, throwing up a ward just in time to block a lightning bolt.

Jake grumbles something to himself and prepares another spell. Jane takes the moment of distraction to slip back a few feet.
"Starting with the cheap shots, huh?" Jade calls. "You scared?"

A chill spreads over the field. Your heart races and your hands start to shake.

A deep voice resonates from everywhere and nowhere and asks, "Are you?"

"Pfft, no," John says. He runs forward, hammer in his hands. "Come on, Jake, that hasn't worked in years."

Jane jumps in front of him but doesn't get her weapon up in time. Instead her hands wrap around Vrillyhoo's handle. She slides backwards a little bit, but then manages to hold John in place. The two of them struggle against one another. John tries to use his extra height and weight to get leverage on her, but she's got a much lower center of gravity, so he can’t quite push her over. Fuck, he really wasn’t kidding about her being strong! Jade and Jake fling fire and lightning at each other in the background.

John dismisses the hammer, making Jane stumble enough that he can disengage and start running towards Jake. Jake shoots a few fireballs that John dodges easily before reaching for his B’ztel. He takes one in each hand and fires.

No. Oh gods, please, please no. You start sprinting towards your partner.

With a sharp gasp, John falls to the ground. He slides a solid three feet because of his momentum, dripping blood the whole way. Jake turns and runs, swapping out the stones. Jade runs toward John with her hands outstretched. Golden light spirals around her hands and a similar light encircles John. Jane tries to close in on them, but John summons an ice atronach to hold her back. He gets to his feet, though his armor still has two gaping holes in the cuirass. You're too far away to see if he’s healed or not.

"Get back, Karkat," He yells. "Don't want you to get hit…"

As soon as he's standing, Jade backs off again and starts shooting spells at Jane. But Jane's too quick with her wards and manages to block everything even while fighting the atronach. John banishes his armor and tears after Jake.

Jake has one B’ztel loaded and turns to fire, but he only grazes John's shoulder and it's not enough to stop him. John summons his hammer and swings.

He stops less than an inch from Jake's head. Then he moves it in gently the rest of the way.

"Boop," he says, lightly tapping his cousin on the temple.

"Confound it all!" Jake exclaims, scowling. Then he notices something across from him and smiles. "But then again…"

"Boop," Jane says, gently poking Jade in the chest with her trident. Jade groans in annoyance and buries her head in her hands.

"Good luck," Jake says, patting him lightly on the shoulder, hand glowing gold. He strolls over to stand next to you.

"So what happens now?" You ask him.

"Well, Jade and I are both 'dead,' which usually happens because you take out the mages first, but since those two are still 'alive' the fight isn't over yet."
Jade trots over to you. "You healed him," she says simply.

He shrugs. "I mean, historically it hasn't made a difference. John has never beaten Jane one on one."

John turns back towards Jane and breathes deeply. Jane smiles and swings her trident.

They both rush forward.

John fights with as much passion as you've ever seen from him, mixing fireballs with physical attacks that would shatter a normal person. But Jane isn't a normal person. He can't break her wards, and even if he does land a direct hit he only staggers her enough that she can't get her own attack in before he's ready to defend.

"Oh no..." Jade says softly. "I tired her out more than usual, but it's not gonna be enough."

"How can you tell?" you ask. "I mean, it looks like they're pretty evenly matched."

She sighs and runs one hand through her braids. "Yeah, right now. But Jane has always had better stamina. Plus she's got four years on him."

You swallow. John's summoning more atronachs so he can get some distance and catch his breath, but Jane tears through them so quickly that he can't be getting much out of the gambit. She rushes forward and he blocks, shoving her back and managing to get a quick swing at her. She staggers away and curses, but then she glows and is back to standing straight and at the ready. It's hard to tell who's actually getting more out of the exchanges.

They were right. John has to be starting to get tired, but you can't get a read on Jane. He has to make a move soon, one last push or he'll just peter out. And he knows it. He's about to get desperate, which means he's also going to get sloppy so unless he has an idea and a good one...

Jane blasts him with frostbite, and he counters with flames. Midway between the two of them water drips to the ground, but there's no movement one way or the other.

"No way," Jade says. "He's actually doing it. He's holding back the ice..."

"Yeah, but he's not winning yet," Jake points out. "Look."

The line wavers and then slowly, incrementally, the ice overcomes the fire. Then it bursts forward. No. This is bad, this is bad. You reach for a potion but then...

"Wuld nah kest!"

It's so fast you can't even see John move, but you know what that shout does. He appears right behind Jane. She looks around, desperately searching for him, but her vision is constrained by the armor so she banishes her helmet, just in time to see him charging towards her. She lifts her trident to try to block a downswing from his hammer, but then he throws it to the side and just tackles her.

Finally, she goes down. He doesn't quite have her pinned, but she's stunned from the blow just long enough for him to get her arms over her head and a bound dagger against her throat. His helmet disappears into a tiny wisp of black smoke. The two just stare at each other in astonishment. Then he rolls off of her and starts laughing.

"Holy shit, I can't believe that worked!" He says.
"We did it!" Jade cries, throwing her hands in the air and running over to embrace John. He falls back into the mud at the impact just as Jane pushes herself up.

"Congratulations," she says, smiling softly.

"Good show!" Jake says, "Next time I know not to heal you, huh?"

"Are you okay?" you ask John, kneeling down beside him.

"Yeah. I'm fine," John says. Jade backs off of him so he can sit up. "Just a little tired."

And you did not bring any stamina or magicka potions. You're so fucking smart. You just plop down next to him and hold him tightly. He's okay. They're all okay, and maybe this thing won't be as impossible as you've built it up to be.

It takes a while for the Egberts to recover enough to head back. It's nearly sunset by the time you get through the gates. After a brief stop at your house and the inn to change, you head over to Jorrvaskr. It smells fantastic in the hall, the scent of food vastly overpowering the smell of sweat and various animals which had been dominant last time. Their massive hearth has been covered in a large meat rack, and the entire thing is loaded heavily with venison. Most of the companions appear to have wandered off, maybe hanging out in the bunkroom down below, but Nepeta and Equius are waiting for you.

Nepeta laughs when she sees the looks on your faces. "You should have seen it when I took down a mew-mith! This was just a fur-teen point elk."

"You took down a mammoth?" Jade asks. "How many people were with you?"

"Just me-ow!"

"Woah! That's so cool!" She sits down next to Nepeta and they start talking about deer before they can even be properly introduced.

Over time, more of your friends drift in, most of them carrying food or casks of ale or wine. They must have been sent off to run errands or something. You don’t see Gamzee appear, but at one point you look up and he’s just there, sipping absently from a mug as Terezi talks to him. It’s hard to tell if he teleported in or if you were just that distracted. You decide not to ask. A little after sunset the vampires join you.

Jade cocks her head to the side. "Where's Dave?"

She's right. He is, indeed, missing.

"He said he had something quick to take care of," Roxy replies, "and that he'd catch up in a few minutes."

"Any idea what it was?" Jade asks.

"Not really."

"I mean," Dirk says, "He was kind of staring at that statue the next street over."

"The shrine of Talos?" you ask. "But don't you guys worship some weird old god or something?"

Rose stares at you incredulously. "Wait, it's a shrine to Talos? That's meant to be him?!"
"Don't you think that's kind of sweet, though?" Roxy laughs. "Our little baby brother still cares."

"What do you mean?" John asks.

Jade giggles. "You should hear him tell it himself. He tries so hard to act like he's completely detached but he's just so not. It's adorable."

The door opens and Dave walks in, lips pressed together in an obvious attempt to keep a straight face.

"How was your errand?" Rose asks smugly, resting her chin on the back of her hand.

"Okay, so I finally went to cash in on that favor Ty owes me. Like, I figured anything to help us out tomorrow night. And this old man in the ugliest orange-est robes I've ever seen in four-fucking-thousand years of un-life walks up to me and says 'come, let me share with you the great wisdom Talos has imparted onto me' and I'm just like 'dude, let me leave my shiny things in peace,' but he starts spouting all of this great, prophetic, pretentious bullshit. And, no lie, the words that left his mouth were pure, self-sacrificing, and unerring."

Rose chuckles softly and Roxy bursts out laughing.

"Fucking All-Maker," Dirk says, covering his mouth. "No sense of irony at all in that?"

"No! I mean, unless those words don't mean what I think they mean anymore because it wouldn't be the first time that happened, but the way he said it makes me think that's totally not the case. Also, apparently they remember him as a fucking Nord. Even though his mom was an elf and no one forced him to get his ear tips cut off. But we still get read as Bretons."

Roxy clicks her tongue. "Dicks."

"So what did you do?" Rose asks.

"I mean, it's not worth having that fight with everyone I run into even if it's still super fucking annoying but-"

"I meant about that preacher." Rose rolls her eyes.

"Oh, that." Dave smirks a little. "I told him that if he really wanted to do something to make Talos happy he'd burn that fucking robe and then I walked off."

"Perfect. I'm sure he would have been proud."

"Wait," you say, "Did you guys actually know Tiber Septim?"

"Better than anyone else," Dave replies. "Except maybe Aggie, but he probably doesn't count anymore."

"How the hell is that possible?" Vriska asks. "I mean, that was like six hundred years ago!"

"Uh, yeah. In case you missed the oh-so-subtle red eyes and pointy teeth thing, we're vampires. Like, immortal creatures of the night and shit? Hi."

"Ooh, what was he like?" Tavros asks excitedly.

Most of the other dunmer give him a strange look. Dave raises an eyebrow. Tavros looks down sheepishly.
"I mean, uh, there's a lot of different stories and stuff. And, um, I've always kind of wondered which one's, er... true?"

"None of them," Rose replies. "Especially not The Real Barenziah, but every version I know of lies more than it tells the truth."

"Is that the one that says he had an affair with a girl?" Dave asks, tone implying that the assertion was absolute lunacy.

"Indeed it is."
He snorts. "Yeah, obviously whoever wrote that had never been in a room with a guy."

"-Or they were endeavoring to piss him off. He was too fond of most other types of slander."

"Yeah..." They both kind of get a far-off look in their eyes.

"Uh? Dave?" Jade taps him on the shoulder.

That seems to snap him out of it. "Right," He says. "Look, we could tell you more about him, but I don't know you all well enough to be sure you wouldn't go spreading shit around and Ty... as weird as it seems she really didn't want that many people to know what he was like as a person."

"Would you- is it okay to ask why?" Tavros asks. "I mean, looking at the things that the sources agree he did... he just doesn't seem to have been particularly, um... humble."

Dave smiles. "Oh fuck no, he was the most ostentatious fuck I've ever known. But his schtick was always about trying to 'make a new normal.' Like, he wanted to convince everyone this was the way things had always been. And I ain't saying it was right, but it was fucking effective." He frowns. "You know, if he was born today he probably would have just stayed in that tiny little village in Falkreath. Might have never even gone to Cyrodiil. He'd have married his boyfriend no one would have batted an eye because he set the precedent so hard you don't have a word to describe people like him anymore. Fuck, you don't even have a word to describe people like me anymore. We're all just... people."

You don't understand. "People like him?" What is that supposed to mean? You start to ask for clarification, but you're cut off as the door swings open. Another Dave stands at the threshold with Aradia at his side. You glance back and forth and, yep, there are two Daves in the room. Everyone falls silent.

"Hey," Dave at the door says.

"Hey," replies the Dave at the table.

"So, this is Aradia," Dave number two gestures to the elf at his side.

"Hi!" Aradia grins and waves.

"Sup?" asks Dave one.

Rose sighs, "What shenanigans are you up to now?"

"I'm not doing anything." Dave two says, "But Aradia and past Dave get to have a good old-fashioned time fight."

"Excuse me," Equius says, "But if you are going to spar I ask you take it outside. We have an area
set up for such duels and-

Dave one brushes him off, "Don't worry. Nothing's going to happen."

"Well, not if I win," Aradia says, smiling.

"Seriously, I've seen this once before," Dave two says, "It'll be fine. Promise not to break anything."

"So how are we doing this?" Dave one asks, getting to his feet and walking towards Aradia.

"Easy!" Aradia claps her hands together. "You try to escape and I'll hold you down."

"A'ight," Dave one says with a shrug.

"Okay," Dave two takes a few steps back. "On your marks, get set, go."

The light shifts a little and the room becomes slightly redder, but nothing else happens. Dave one blinks in confusion and Aradia's grin widens.

"Well then," he says.

He shifts his stance, and Aradia's arm twitches. There's a few more small movements then he starts to shake and sweat beads at her brow. You blink and Dave one is gone, reappearing in the same place a moment later.

"Holy shit," he says, running his fingers through his hair."

"I know, right?" Dave two asks. He pulls out a small scrap of paper. "Go get her there."

Dave one looks down at the paper and then nods. He turns back to the rest of you "Cool, see you all two minutes ago."

And then he's gone in a flash of red light.

Aradia frowns. "I thought that maybe…"

The remaining Dave pats her on the shoulder. "Dude, I’ve been doing this for centuries. And you kept me down for a solid seventy-five seconds. That's not nothing."

"Yeah," Dirk says. "I haven't seen anything like that in a long-ass time."

Dave goes over and takes the seat the other Dave had just been sitting in.

"Hi," he says softly to Jade.

"Pfft, you transparent dork!" She throws her arms around him and they kiss.

And kiss. And kiss. You avert your eyes and feel your face heating up. Guh, why is everything so awkward these days?! Eventually, Rose coughs and they break apart.

"Damn Harley, needy much?" Dave asks, fooling absolutely no one.

She smacks him on the shoulder.

You really, really, really hope Jade remembers your deal when you all get back home.
"Oh yeah!" Dave pulls out a large gold pendant from under his shirt. "Can you fix the thing?"

Jade takes it in her hands and opens it like a locket. But it’s like an inch deep. Wait, is that… When you peek around you see gears and a little black stick. He's got a Shornhelm Egg. Even though he has his uncanny sense of time. Huh.

"Dave, you just need to wind it."

"Yeah, but I forgot how."

"Fucking Eight, You are absolutely useless."

"Okay, Harley, learn how to patch Stalhrim armor and then talk to me."

She rolls her eyes and turns a small crank near where the pendant attaches to the chain. The gears start clicking away, which catches Dirk's attention.

"Hey, bro, what's that?"

"None of your business." Dave quickly closes the cover.

"Look, I just wanna-"

"Come on, Dirk, I've known you for four thousand years. You want to take it apart to figure out how it works, and then you're gonna need five more to take apart to figure out how to get it back together. You've been doing this since they invented watermills."

"Okay, fine, I won't take it apart. I just want to look at-"

"Make Jake buy you one!" Dave tucks the pendant back under his shirt and scowls at his brother.

"You're no fun," Dirk grumbles.

You glance over to John and he just shrugs and turns back to his mead.

“Hey guys!” Nepeta calls from beside the fire. “I think this is just about done!”

There’s a stampede to get to the meat. You hang back for a moment and just watch the utter devastation that is being wrought, especially once the rest of the companions notice that there’s food and surge up into the main hall. Then you realize that if you want any of this you might have to get involved. With a sigh, you get up and throw yourself into the pile.

Turns out, Nepeta’s a pretty good cook and it’s totally worth it.

John snores quietly next to you, his body soft and warm against yours. His arm is thrown over your waist, holding you gently. It's all comfortable and lovely and familiar, but you can't sleep. You've been laying here for hours, watching the sun slowly rise through the shutters and your mind just keeps finding new things to tie itself in knots over.

You should go. Maybe if you take a walk it'll help clear your head. If you don't do something you'll just keep running around in mental circles and then you won't get any sleep and you'll really be screwed.
You carefully slide John’s hand away. When you get to your feet he whines and reaches out for you. His eyes are still shut, but he just looks so sad and adorable. This man is going to be the death of you, you just know it.

Maybe sooner rather than later.

You tuck the blankets back around him and gently stroke his hair, hoping it gives his unconscious mind a bit of solace. You get dressed but then pause at the bedside table. You reach into the strongbox and take out your ring. It isn’t right, you’re not supposed to yet, but... You slide it back onto your finger. It fits perfectly and feels like it's meant to be there. Part of you still can’t quite believe this is real, that John actually had this made for you, that he actually wants to keep you. He wants to bring you home, to keep you by his side for the rest of his life. But the ring is there, smooth and cool. It's always heavier than you think it's going to be. Such a dense little thing.

You're not sure if that's because of the metaphorical weight of the object or because other than the decoration it's pure gold. But you can't help but like it. You go through the door, ring still in place.

Dave sits at the table downstairs. You startle when you see him, expecting everyone else to still be asleep. He glances over to you briefly but then turns back to the open window. The warm golden light of the afternoon sun somehow makes him look even paler. Not counting your split-second glances last night, this is the first time you've seen him without his vest. You knew it was padded, but you didn’t realize just how much it added to him. He’s still far from waifish, as strong and sturdy as you’d expect a Nord to be, but sitting at your table, glancing forlornly out the window wearing nothing but a tunic, he looks vulnerable enough that it makes you just a little bit uncomfortable.

"Doesn’t that hurt?" You ask, more to break the silence than to get an answer. "I mean, it's pretty bright in here."

He shrugs. “Not too bad when it’s indirect like this. Sometimes I just like to remind myself what the world looks like during the day.”

“Afraid you won’t see it again?”

“Are you?”

You go and sit down beside him, fidgeting with your ring a little bit. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

He smirks just a little and shakes his head. “Sorry, bro. You don’t have enough friendship points to unlock my tragic backstory. For now let's just say I'm less afraid of dying and a whole lot more afraid who we’ll run into up there.”

You roll your eyes. “Sure, Dave.” A bird flutters by outside. You hear some kids running around playing tag. A dog barks. Everything out there is just going along, just living. You’re keenly aware of the fact that he doesn’t breathe. You don't like it. “Mind if I ask a non-'tragic backstory’ related question?”

“Go for it.”

“I know if we lose, Alduin destroys the world. I get that. But what if we win? I mean, according to you, this reality basically exists so this fight can take place. So what happens after it's over?”

“Oh. That.” He takes a deep breath. “Honestly, I donno. Not gonna lie, part of me is just glad someone else is at all concerned about it.”
“What? The others aren’t?”

“Yeah,” Dave runs his fingers through his hair. “For some reason they’re all a lot more okay with the idea of being a memory of a dream for some other versions of themselves. But then again, Roxy’s always been the optimist of the family, and I guess when you wind up with the same person ninety percent of the time like Rose and Dirk do you’ve got less to worry about. People like you and me, we’re all over the board and I guess that makes it a little harder to face the possibility.”

“Is that why you’re up? Because you’re afraid that in twenty-four hours you’re gonna wake up and Jade won’t mean a thing to you?” It comes out with such little bidding that it’s practically a confession instead of an accusation.

Thankfully, he doesn’t capitalize on that. Instead he just says, “Not quite. I don’t think any of us are gonna be nothing to each other once this is all over. But yeah, different Daves fall for different people at different times. Don’t think anyone can blame me for not wanting to give this up.”

You swallow because, yeah, you don’t either. Especially not now… “Do you think we’ll have to?” You ask.

“I told you already, I don’t know. That’s what makes it scary, because there’s no way to make peace with this ahead of time.” He turns and looks straight at you. It’s hard to be sure, but you think you can see a little bit of worry creeping into his emotionless façade. “No matter what she does, Rose can’t see past tonight. I mean, she always has some blank spots when there’s gonna be something super pivotal, but it’s never been this bad.”

“Well, at least one way or another tomorrow we won’t have to worry about this.”

He keeps staring at you, too unreadable for you to stand. You turn to watch out the window, seeing the leaves on the trees sway gently in the spring breeze.

“You talked to John about this?” He eventually asks.

“Pfft, yeah right. He’s got enough to worry about. I’m not gonna add myself to that pile.”

He stares at you flatly.

“What?”

“Upstairs. Now.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but go have a feelings chat with your boyfriend.”

“But he’s asleep and-”

“And knowing that dork he’ll sleep better if you’re there. Or something. Donno, you figure out some justification if you want, but I’m getting the feeling you need this.” He shoves you a little, trying to get you out of your chair.

You stand. Let it never be said you can’t take a hint. “I’ll do it if you talk to Jade.”

“Come on dude, I’m-”

You raise an eyebrow.
“Okay, fine.” He gets to his feet with a sigh and follows you upstairs.

When you get back to your room, John’s sitting up waiting for you. He wordlessly opens his arms. You sit on the edge of the bed and let him embrace you as you start to talk.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, B’ztel (the name I gave to a dwemer flintlock piston) does not exist in game. In spite of the technology of most high fantasy being basically early modern and well after the invention of gunpowder, they never let us have firearms or cannon which is, of course, bullshit.

If anyone was uncertain, though he wouldn’t think of himself in this way due to some stuff about first era nordic culture I made up and we’ll see next time, Dave falls into the category we think of as trans. His vest is designed to be both a binder (lacing down to squish his chest) and to pad his waist, a method of creating the illusion of a more "masculine" fat distribution that, from what I understand, used to be an additional method of helping folks with more estrogen pass as men.

There’s a lot I could say about this chapter, and I feel like there’s a lot packed in there. Let me know if there was anything confusing or ways you can think of to improve the pacing. Some questions will get answered next time, in the finale.
You and Karkat give up on pretending to sleep at around three. You think you might have taken a couple of short naps, but you know you're going to be relying on fear and excitement to carry you through the night.

The two of you quickly gulp down some breakfast-dinner-whatever and get your armor on. Before you leave you take a length of twine, thread it through your ring and tie it around your neck. Karkat slips his onto his amulet's chain. You didn't enchant them or anything, and even if you did it wouldn't help unless they were actually on your fingers, which would make your gauntlets fit wrong. But it's still nice to have it with you, to feel it move against your chest. Maybe it'll help bring you a little luck.

Fully armed and armored, the two of you make your way through town to Dragonsreach. The Jarl's steward greets you as you enter and directs you to the great porch. Your eyes are immediately drawn to the ceiling. Is the trap fixed? Did they manage to do it? You should have stopped by earlier, just to check. If this all falls apart now you don't know what you'll do. The massive wooden yoke still hangs there, more or less the same as the last time you were here. Several guards stand at the ready, clutching their levers tightly, looking uncertain.

"Is that it?" Karkat demands.

"It held a dragon before, and with any hope it shall do it again," Balgruuf says, stepping outside.

"Is it ready?" You ask. "Please tell me it's ready."

"Aye. The real question is 'are you?'" You take a deep breath. "As we're gonna be."

"I hope you have a plan to lure the beast here, dragonborn. This trap will only work if we get him in the right position."

"Don't worry about it. Just have your guys stand back."

You walk up to the railing. Gods, sometimes you almost forget how beautiful this province is. You look out over miles of farmland until the carefully maintained patches grow further and further apart and you're faced with an untamed ocean of tundra, the pale green dotted pink and purple and blue with flowers. A small group of giants herds its mammoths further towards the north, their massive forms tiny gray and brown lumps in the distance. The gleaming snow on top of the purplish mountains is sharp against the black sky.

You look over at Karkat. He nods and draws his sickles. Okay, it's time. You close your eyes and shout the dragon's name.

For a few moments nothing happens. It's silent except for the wind howling over the plains.

One of the guards turns to her comrade. "Did… did it work?"
"He's coming," you say. "He has to."

There's a far-off roar and then against the darkening sky you see something shining. Then it gets in front of one of the moons, and you recognize the silhouette of a dragon. It's the right one, Ohdaviing. You're absolutely certain of it.

"Alright men!" Balgruuf shouts. "Get ready!"

A few of the guards draw their bows.

"No," you say. "Just stay on the trap. We'll take care of this."

Ohdaviing approaches, tearing across the tundra. He's nearly to the farms now. Oh Akatosh he's huge, even for a dragon. But you have to hold your ground; you've got to catch him. You feel the voice starting to come back to you. Just a few seconds more and you'll be able to use Dragonrend on him. But he's nearly here, flying over the city now.

The power is ready just as he reaches the cloud district and you let out a shout. Ohdaviing's eyes go wide as his wings clamp down at his sides. He's still heading straight forward, and at this speed…

You and Karkat turn and run for cover. The dragon crashes into the porch, taking some of the railing with him. He pushes himself up and opens his mouth, about to shoot fire or ice or something else nasty. You throw up as big of a ward as you can muster, managing to cover yourself, Karkat, and one of the guards. Ohdaviing crawls forward, black eyes locked on you. You run back, drawing him deeper under the ceiling. Just a little more…

"Now!" Balgruuf yells.

Chains clank and the yoke descends. Two halves of a metal ring shoot out, clamping down around the dragon's neck. He tries to spit fire but runes carved into the massive wooden yoke glow and all that comes out is a pained roar.

Ohdaviing turns to look at you and flares his nostrils. He says something in Draconian and Miraak kindly translates.

"No! Trapped like a bear! My eagerness to meet you in battle brought my defeat. Were it not for this accursed contraption-!"

*John, Miraak says, I believe it will be easier if you let me help you. I can put your thoughts into language.*

*Do it.* You let him take control of your voice for a moment.

"Relax. We just want to talk."

Oh gods this feels weird.

*I suppose you don't want me to say that part?"

*No!*

Ohdaviing narrows his eyes at you. "I was told you do not understand our speech."

"I had help."

"Fine. But why this dishonorable (lowly, human) tactic?"
"I had the feeling you would want to fight. But you have information I need. I cannot take it if you are dead."

He cocks his head to the side and blinks. "It cannot be… Miraak?"

"Not exactly."

"But that voice (shout, power) before was not his. Which means…” He drifts off for a moment. A transparent eyelid flicks back and forth and he moves his head a bit closer to you. "You've conquered the conqueror."

"Yes."

You swear you can almost see a smirk on the dragon's mouth. "Then perhaps I was right in coming here."

Karkat touches your arm gently. "John? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just fine," you reply in Cyrodillic.

He gives you an incredulous look, but before he can say anything the dragon speaks again.

"Many of us have wondered whether Alduin's voice (shout, power) was truly the strongest. None have dared challenge him directly, but you... If you have defeated the man who has slain a thousand dragons, perhaps you can also defeat our lord."

Maybe, Miraak thinks, if I'm quick about it I can mention that the only reason he won is because he cheated.

No. Besides, it's not like I'm going in alone here either!

Instead he/you say, "Tell me where he is."

"He is in Sovngarde, where he regains his strength by consuming (defeating, conquering) the souls of the dead."

"How do I get there?"

"He has created a portal (path). It is high in the eastern mountains, in an old temple called Skuldafn."

Before you can formulate exactly what to ask next Miraak speaks through you. "Then you will fly us to him."

Fly? You ask him.

He shows you the mental image of an old Nordic ruin perched on top of a massive pillar of stone. It looks like someone forgot mountains were supposed to have slopes and just cut sheer cliffs around the summit. Yeah, okay, you get it.

"Indeed I shall," Ohdaviing replies. "As soon as you let me free."

"I will," you say. "But first promise not to hurt me or anyone else in this city."

The dragon pulls his head back so he can fix both eyes on you. "I give you my word as a dragon, a son of Akatosh and being far more noble than any mortal (lesser, dishonorable) could ever be. The
only harm that will come to you is that which will find challenging Alduin."

"Let him go." You say to the guards.

"Are you crazy?" Karkat demands. "We just got him!"

"I know, but we're gonna need him to help us."

"This is a bad idea," he says.

"Maybe, but the way to Sovngarde is at the top of a hundred foot cliff a few days from here. You got any better ideas for how to get there today?"

He frowns. "I don't trust this. He could drop us from a mile over the tundra."

"I'll take that as a no. Besides, if he tries to turn on us I've got the bend will shout."

"I suppose… I suppose you do." He takes a deep breath. "Alright, let's do this."

The guards standing at the ready pull the yoke back up. Ohdaviing turns and crawls towards the edge of the porch. You get ready to shout if he tries to fly, but instead he just turns his massive head and blinks at you expectantly.

Karkat squares his shoulders and takes the lead, sliding right into place at the juncture of Ohdaviing's neck and head. You climb on behind him and the dragon spreads his wings. With a leap that makes your stomach fly up into your throat, Ohdaviing launches himself from the porch. He gains altitude and turns, carrying you away from the setting sun and into the blackening eastern horizon.

You are, all things considered, rather interested in what the Egberts have come up with. After all, your siblings speak quite highly of their respective paramours, and you know John can be rather clever when he puts effort into it. They certainly have something big planned, but you are currently in the dark. Both metaphorically and literally. You and your fellow vampires, of course, do not leave the inn until after the sun has fully set, and so you had assumed you would be among the last to reach John and Karkat's house. But the shutters are drawn and no smoke rises from the chimney. You didn't somehow miss the event, did you? What would that even mean for you? For the world?

Kanaya steps up and knocks at the door. It opens just a crack and Jake peers out at you. Behind him, you see the soft eerie glow of magelight. He lets out a relieved sigh when he sees it's you and opens the door a bit more widely.

"Come in, quickly. Sorry it's a bit cramped, but we have to make do, eh?"

Yes, it did look rather quaint when you bothered spying on them, didn't it? But it appears they've managed to make room. The kitchen table has been shoved to the side and all the chairs and end tables balanced somewhat precariously on top of it. And yet only Jade and Jane sit in the center of the room. Everyone sits or stands against the walls, silently staring at the two women. Only Dave bothers to pay you any mind, giving you a glance and a brief wave before turning his gaze back to them.

Jade's eyes are closed and she has a human jawbone clutched in her hands, while Jane has John's hammer in her lap and stares down at it intently. The two women sit cross-legged and opposite each other, separated by the empty hearth. The oddly empty hearth. Not only are both the fire and any cooking implements absent, but all the old ash has been dug out for some reason. You peer
down and-

Oh. See? You said John could be clever when he put his mind to it. A rune has been carved into the stone at the bottom of the pit. The sigil is familiar enough, though you haven't used it in centuries, two crossed hooks with a wide arch behind them. It's a perfect spot to put an illegal spell. If a person simply clearing ash they wouldn't reach it and if they did most would assume it was a scratch.

"Well," Dirk says, "That explains why he was so sure we'd be back by tonight."

"And also why he was being so sparse on the details," you add. "Teleportation and blood magic? I wonder how many years in jail that'd get you these days… though I don’t doubt they’d be able to get an Imperial Pardon."

"Wait," Roxy says, blinking. "Teleportation is illegal now? When did that happen?"

But before you can answer, Jane startles. The hammer has turned slightly translucent, and wisps of black smoke are coming off of it. She closes her eyes and grips it tightly and it begins to solidify again. Jade opens her eyes and they glow supernaturally green.

More green light fills the room and then you're gone.

Ohdaviing curls up like a cat at the edge of the cliff, watching you with mild interest. Karkat stares up at the sky. He's supposed to be keeping looking out for dragons but he occasionally slips up, glancing down at you like he's afraid you'll burst into flames or something. But you can't pay attention to him. For now, you focus on the skull. You can just barely feel Jade through it, presence warm and friendly and comfortable.

She sends out three sharp burst of energy that make your fingers tingle. You hope the colonel doesn't mind you using his head for this too much. The relic seems to like the idea of being put back together at least… No, John. Focus. You need to focus. Especially now. Because three pulses means it's time.

You set the skull down in your lap and call for your hammer. But as you reach for it Jane, cool and smooth, tightens her grip. You keep that connection, tugging ever so gently. But she pulls back, keeping Vrillyhoo back in Whiterun. Jade wraps around both of you, holding you together around the hammer.

And then you pull. It doesn't want to move. Of course not, not with everything attached to it. But you need this. You're not giving up. A little more should make it start to slide and when it does… Your fingers tighten around smooth metal and the air tastes of lightning and sulfur. When the shocks of magic fade from your bones you collapse backwards, clutching your hammer to your chest.

"Wreath of Azura..." One of the Dunmer says softly. It's not Karkat, so you don't really care who it was. You just close your eyes and try to catch your breath.

"Well," Jake says cheerily, "Glad that worked! Tally ho, then!"

"Fuck no!" Karkat interjects. "Any of you assholes who didn't just try to pull two tons of meat and metal forty miles through two fucking planes shut the fuck up for a minute!"

He shoves a bottle into your hands and you assume he probably does the same for Jane and Jade because you hear them popping corks. You down the mouthful and a half of potion and oh hello
"Oh my," Jane says, getting to her feet. "What is even in that?"

"A lot of expensive shit," Karkat grumbles. "Let's leave it at that."

"Well, it was worth it," you say, clapping him on the shoulder. "But as one of those assholes who just pulled two tons of meat and metal forty miles, we've got some dragons to fight!" You begin the charge up the hill, and the others follow.

As soon as you get within sight of the outer walls the fighting begins. Dozens of draugr archers stand along the battlements, arrows at the ready, and two dragons dive down towards you.

Dave and Dirk are up on the walls in a flash, slicing through draugr and dodging fire balls, ice spikes, and bursts of lightning coming from below. As your enemies fall, Aradia's hands glow purple and the draugr stand back up, turning on their allies. You shout one of the dragons down and Vriska charges forward, slicing its wings so it won't get back up, even after Dragonrend fades. Tavros has his flute out, creating an aura of protection around your mages. As Equius runs over towards the downed dragon, he gets caught in one of Jade's lightning blasts. Jane leaps forward and fixes his arm before running back to deal with a stray arrow that managed to get Sollux in the leg.

There's a high pitched skree as Karkat's chaurus breaks through the ground and squares off against one of the dragons. It's all you can do to keep shouting dragons down and maybe fling the occasional spell. There's so much going on you're not entirely sure where to turn or what to do, but your body reacts with little input.

As soon as most of the archers are down you rush into the complex. You don't have to kill all of them, you remind yourself. Just enough to get through, to find the portal. You can feel it higher up, big and sharp and swelteringly hot. A low humming noise reverberates through your bones, and it feels almost like it's shaking them just a hair out of place. It's already uncomfortable from here, so you're pretty sure getting close is gonna really suck. But you have to go, have to keep pushing forward.

You make your way up to the temple, and when you enter Jade freezes the hinges shut. It'll buy you time if nothing else. There are more draugr inside, of course, but there's less room for them to maneuver. The mages stand back and let you and the other short-range fighters hit them as they come. Vriska and Karkat sneak ahead, stabbing some before they're able to wake up.

Then you reach one of the column puzzles and have to pause. The Draugr keep coming from behind. You and Dave stand at the door, cutting them down as they try to force their way through the narrow opening.

"Ugh," Karkat says as he turns one of the columns so it's facing the right direction. "Why did they even bother with these things?"

It briefly crosses your mind that you'd never really thought about that. Miraak tries to explain, but then the far door opens and another wave of draugr comes in to surround you. Normally that'd be a concern, but about a dozen spells blast them before they can even enter the room. You hold the other door just long enough for everyone else to clear out and then make a break for it. Dave throws a switch once you're through the other door, lowering bars and keeping any more outside reinforcements from coming.

Honestly, it's all pretty standard for a dungeon. There are three puzzles you need to complete, one of which is a puzzle door, but the biggest nastiest draugr had they key on him. Yeah, maybe the draugr are a little bit stronger, but other than that it's just grating. But maybe that was the plan, to
make it so you're tired when you finally get to Sovngarde, so you can put up less of a fight…

But at least you're getting closer. You're sure of it, because with every step the portal feels hotter and more abrasive. The hum is getting louder too and it makes a deeply unsettling feeling in your belly. It can't be long now.

Finally, you go through the last door and break out into the night. Dragons circle above, so you keep pressed back against the overhang so they can't see you. On an adjacent piece of stone you see a massive spiraling pillar of white light. Four dragons circle it.

Whelp, that'll be it, then.

One of the draugr that had been looking out over the courtyard turns and sees you. It lets out a growl and its friends start to close in on you. Time to move.

You run around the corner, looking for the stairs that will take you to the roof and give your mages the high ground. When you find it you tear upwards, but as you reach the top the beam of light and the low hum cut out. You sigh with relief as the unsettling feeling goes with it. A lich growls something at you and brandishes its staff.

Miraak clicks his tongue. *Well that's not very nice.*

The lich thrusts its arm forward, shooting a wall of lightning in your direction. But you're not about to get caught that easily. You run out of the way and shout down one dragon. It looks like Gamzee managed to get himself on top of another one, and you're not sure what's happening but that's a lot of blood.

"John! Watch out!"

Jane leaps in front of you, casting a ward that stops the wall of lightning. She charges forward but Nepeta gets there first, thrusting her claws through the lich's chest. Then Jane stabs it through the other way and it collapses into a pool of ashes. Eridan got caught on the edge of one of the other dragon's blasts, but Feferi is on it, healing him quickly. Kanaya has her axe embedded into the first dragon's spine, and you shout down another. More of the Dunmer descend on it, Terezi in the lead with her sword drawn, but Karkat and Dave kneel down beside where the lich died. They look carefully at the ground but you don't think there's much of-

No, John. There's one more dragon. Take care of it. But as you open your mouth to shout, Rose and Sollux hit it with a joint burst of lightning and it falls. And, oh gosh, there are a lot of souls coming at you at once. The white completely fills your vision and voices fill your ears and it hurts.

Taking a soul has never hurt like this before.

Four dragons is a lot at once, Miraak says. *We should have started with two and worked our way up.*

Too late for that now!

When your vision finally clears, the portal's back open. Jane is kneeling at your side, healing hands pressed against your shoulder. Karkat’s standing between you and the draugr, sickles drawn. The lich's staff stands in the center of a looping flower-like pattern. Just on the far side of it there’s a drop off, and below that is a blinding white pool of light and magic. You hear the zap of spells and the clash of weapons behind you, but everything else is nearly drowned out by the noise of the portal. You can feel it pushing against you, trying to force you back. Every fiber of your being wants to draw away from it. Fuck, you really don't want to do this. But you have to, and you're not
gonna be the one to tear down morale.

"To Sovngarde!" You cheer.

But no one cheers after you. You turn, and it looks like most of the group is fighting off a wave of draugr. They have the stairs as a choke point, but…

"Come on! We've got to keep moving!" you cry.

"No," Rose says. "It would be too dangerous for everyone to follow you."

"What do you mean?"

"This is a permanent, physical portal. Something like this… If it's destroyed you'll be trapped there forever. If it's not, the Draugr will flood in and have an open field to surround us."

"But prophesy says-" Dave starts to argue.

"I know what it says!" She turns to him and frowns. "It says the twenty of us unite in a way that implies doing battle. Well here we are. We're fighting together. It doesn't necessarily have to be in Sovngarde. I know my loopholes, brother."

Well, in that case. "Jane?" You say.

"Yes?"

"If things start going wrong, especially if Jake and Jade go down I need you to run. Your recall is still keyed to the castle's grotto, right?"

You see her wanting to argue, but then she looks over at the portal.

"Jane, our family can't handle another Corten."

She takes a deep breath. "Okay."

Karkat nods. "Then who all is coming with us?"

"Me and Aradia for sure," Dave says. "You need time magic."

"Hey, since we're going to Aetherius soul magic can't hurt," Dirk says. "I'll be right behind you."

Rose nods. "Understood. I'd prefer one of you stayed, but as long as Roxy stays here we should be able to make do."

Terezi leaps into the air and slashes a dragon's wing open.

"Actually, I think we'll make do quite well."

You take Karkat's hand in yours.

"You ready?" You ask.

"Nope."

"Me neither." With that, the two of you leap down into the portal.
This feels nothing like the times John's taken you to Oblivion. All you get as you enter the vortex is a feeling of warmth and comfort as you're gently pushed a bit forward and then lowered down to the ground. But John actually stumbles. You manage to catch him before he hits the ground and he just looks at you in surprise. He doesn't glow here. Actually, his eyes look almost grey, but you decide it must be the fog and the dim blue lighting.

"Something’s wrong," he says, straightening back up.

“What is it?” You ask, drawing your sickles and looking around.

"I-"

But before he can answer Dirk and Dave appear behind you, followed by Aradia. None of them seem to have any sort of difficulty coming through. And John perks up as soon as he sees them, slapping the cheerful façade right back on. Well, there goes that chance.

You look out ahead. The five of you stand on top of a large platform, stairs leading down the side of the hill. Ahead of you is a snow-covered forest, and you think you see more mountains in the distance. Above you the heavens swirl, pink and blue light intermingling with clouds and stars. But when you look down everything is wrapped in thick fog. You can't even see where the stairs stop.

John still hasn't said anything else. He has his hand over his mouth and nose. When he pulls it away, there's some watery black liquid clinging to it. What in the world? He looks at you with worry and confusion.

"Come on, let's not keep Lord English waiting!" Dave says, twirling his sword.

You frown at him, but don’t say anything. John won’t open up in front of these guys, even if he knew exactly what was going on and how to fix it. And you don’t have much time.

"Hang on," Dirk says when you get to the foot of the hill. "You feeling what I'm feeling?"

"The mist not being mist thing?" Dave replies. "And here I thought it was just wishful thinking." He clears his throat. "Come on, dude, I know you wanna make an entrance, but you really should at least come say hi."

Some of the fog gets thicker, more condensed, until it takes the form of a man. He's taller and broader than John, but he hunches his shoulders and refuses to make eye contact. Most of his lower face is hidden by a beard, and the rest of his body is obscured by a full set of plate armor. You get the feeling he would have been much more comfortable to stay as mist. Aradia makes a delighted little sound and claps at the trick.

"Aggie?" Dave says. "You're the welcoming committee?"

"Ty didn't mention you were bringing people," he hisses.

"Fucking all-maker," Dave says, rolling his eyes. "Sorry we called you out, but we were kind of expecting him to be the one who would-"

"Oh, normally he is! Or we both are! But with this dragon nonsense everyone's all holed up in the Hall of Valor, which means we have about twelve-thousand years of cultural dissonance in one space, including at least four distinct systems of gender with countless temporal and spatial variations. And the new arrivals really struggle with the whole profession-as-gender thing that you had back in the first era and of course the men refuse to stand for that. So my stupid husband wants to sit and watch the fighting because he thinks maybe if he encourages it enough everyone will"
start to agree gender is stupid and we should get rid of it. 'It'll be fine, babe,' he said, 'we're gods and we've been soul-bound for six hundred years,' he said. 'You must have picked up some people skills by now.' Meanwhile he's back there having the time of his afterlife!"

"It's okay, big guy," Dirk stretches up and pats him on the shoulder. "Would you really rather be the one left there instead?"

"Not really. Some of those guys are... anyway, we should get going."

"But you haven't even introduced us yet!" Aradia leaps forward and holds out her hand to the massive man in greeting. "I'm Aradia Megido! Here to help Dave with the time magic!"

"Uh, hi," Aggie says.

Dave sighs. "Okay, fine. Aggie, that's John Egbert, he's this century's chosen one, and the other elf is Karkat Vantas. He's effectively got your old job of attempting to keep a fledgling dragonborn in line."

Aggie whistles. "Good luck. Also, I've got a tip for you: don't let him collect too many things. It may be cute at first, but it's a huge, huge mistake."

"Okay?" You say.

"Anyway, you three, this is Agnorith Septim, but we all call him Aggie. He's basically the more rational half of Talos. Rumors of him being related to Ty being related come out of an old interregnum excuse for bein' real close to someone of your own gender and are complete bullshit. If Ty built the empire, Aggie's the reason it didn't fall apart in two seconds."

"Well, I don't know about that..." Is he blushing? Yeah, he is totally blushing. He's half of a god you weren't even sure existed and he's getting flustered by Dave's approval. What even is your life?

Dave groans. "Okay, I know Ty has way more than enough pride for the two of you, but let's be real, can you see him doing any of the accounting things? 'Okay, guys, let's just throw the rice and wheat into the streets because who gives a fuck about that and the imperial coffers keep all the taxes paid in gold, jewels, or nice fabric.'"

Agnorith – you don't feel right calling a god by a diminutive, even if the Striders are doing it – snorts. "Come on, he's not that bad."

"Oh yeah?" The three of them turn and start walking into the fog. "I know you have to remember the gold bed sheets thing."

"Please don't remind me. But related, I've caught him sleeping on a pile of gold with what is supposed to be his face printed on it."

"No fucking way. Please tell me he never gets to live it down."

"Never."

You and John exchange slightly confused looks, but Aradia just prances merrily forward. Maybe you should have pressed Dave harder on that "tragic backstory" after all.

Even if you can only see a few feet in front of you, the cobblestones of the small path keep extending, hopefully leading towards the stronghold. Just in case, you stick close to Agnorith and try not to think too hard about the fact that you are literally following Talos to Shor's hall. You
might be half nord, and Windhelm might be full to the brim of Talos-worship, but you never really expected this to happen to you. Especially before you died. It's just all so surreal you can't process it well enough to even freak out properly.

It looks like John gets it a little better. He's keeping his expression fairly even, but there's awe and just a touch of terror in his eyes. That's probably the right reaction, isn't it? Of course, he might also just be worried about whatever the fuck is wrong with him. Every now and then a little more of that black stuff will seep out of his nose or he'll cough some up. Since you're in the back no one else seems to notice, or perhaps they’re just pretending not to. You keep one hand on a healing potion, just in case he needs it.

After about five minutes, a massive man appears out of the fog. He stands over eight feet tall and has a battleaxe the size of a horse is strapped to his back.

"Halt," he says. His voice booms across the valley, but it doesn't sound like the word you know he just said. Yet you're absolutely positive it's what he meant. You have to remember to ask John if this is what having Miraak in his head is like. "Agnorith, what is the meaning of (by what right do you claim) this?"

"Uh… Ty said it would be okay?"

"Oh All-Maker," Dirk says, rubbing his temple.

The large man pays him no mind. "But these are beings of flesh and blood, it is not yet their time. Shor commanded me millennia ago to allow naught but virtuous (valorous, warrior) souls (dead) to enter his hall." Oh fuck, it's Tsun, guardian of the Hall of Valor. It's totally Tsun and all of this is real or you're having a way more elaborate dream than usual.

Agnorith swallows. He’s big but Tsun towers above him. If it comes to a fight, you should probably go with Talos, but…

"Well… Well Shor's not here anymore," Agnorith says, squaring his shoulders. "The world-eater is. Kyne gave my husband and me power over this realm in his place. And I say you will allow me to defend it with more than fog."

"Go Aggie!" Dave whispers. Dirk’s lips quirk up in what could almost be called a proud smile.

John coughs up a little more black slime, but then it’s quiet. A moment later, Tsun closes his eyes and nods.

"You speak true, Agnorith," he says, stepping aside. "And if they have come to fight Alduin, I suppose they shall prove their valor soon enough."

He waves his hand and clears a tunnel through the fog behind him, leading over the whalebone bridge to the Hall of Valor. Holy shit. You feel your hands start to tremble. Agnorith struts across confidently, followed by the Striders and Aradia. You start walking across, trying not to stumble over any of the ribs, and John comes a few steps behind.

You turn and are about to ask him if he's okay, even though you know you’re not gonna get a true answer, when Agnorith speaks again.

"Alright, so here we go. Do yourselves a favor, and don't assume anything about anyone. Ask them what they want to be called, or you're probably going to get into a fight. And we really don't need that right now. Especially since you’re not just gonna reappear here if you’re killed. Probably, anyway."
With that, he throws the massive doors open. The light from inside is almost blinding when it reflects off of the mist. There's a loud cheer from inside and you can't help but be pulled forward into the building.

The inside of the hall is warm and bright. The view through the massive windows is blocked by the fog outside, but it's still a pretty pale blue against the slate of the walls and floors and the bright orange of the fires. Rich silk tapestries shimmer in the light. Huge stone tables stretch out in front of you, covered with food and drink held in golden vessels. Two massive bulls have been spitted and are being turned over the fire by some unseen force.

John inhales sharply and staggers into you.

On the far end of the room you see a figure get to their feet. Immediately everyone falls silent. The person vanishes and a cloud of white smoke rolls across the room, going right over the fire. They reform a few inches in front of you. They're neither particularly tall nor short, but certainly more slim than broad, and their face is pleasant enough but without any particularly striking features. They look more human than elf, but you can see the tips of their ears peeking out from their long pale hair. And yet there's something about their presence that makes you feel small, weak. The clothes make them stand out even more. Most people in this hall wear armor, but this person has flowing ivory robes accented with gold embroidery. A large sapphire-studded crown is balanced atop their head, and there's only one person you can imagine it would be.

"Okay," Tiber Septim says, "I was planning on letting the Striders have a cute little teary reunion or whatever, but what the fuck did you do to your soul, you dumb motherfucker?!" He puts one hand on either side of John's head and stares deeply into his eyes.

"Um…" John says.

"A daedra," he says flatly. "They decided to make the last dragonborn, the one we all knew would have to come to fucking Aetherius, part daedra. Who authorized this? I bet it was Arkay. He never really liked me. I can hear him now, oh kid you think you're a miracle worker? Well bitch, keep this from dying. Good luck.' Well fuck you I totally can."

"Um," John repeats.

"Hi to you too, honey," Agnorith grumbles.

"Shut up. So, okay dragonborn, we're gonna try this. Scream if you feel like you're dying." His eyes glow yellow.

John winces but nothing happens.

"Alright, guess not. So healing doesn't do much. Oh, what about…” He goes a bit blue and then John gasps, color returning to his face. "Better?"

"Better," he confirms, blinking in surprise.

"Makes sense. Aetherius is made of magicka, so drain magicka helps siphon off the extra Aetherius." Tiber takes a step back. "Let's just be grateful you brought your body along. As it is your soul is currently the equivalent of a bag that has been filled with coals and now you're dangling it over a fire and you're wondering why you're getting holes and leaking everywhere. Dirk, keep on that until you get back to Nirn, okay? And you, little dragonborn, do what you gotta today, but after this you keep your damn soul tucked somewhere safe and let it heal and start assimilating some of the shit you picked up for a goddamn minute. That means no visiting
Oblivion, no summoning shit, and for fuck's sake no more hunting dragons!"

"Okay." John says. He turns to you and cocks his head in confusion. Like you're any less lost than he is.

"Did you even think about what would happen if you just died here? My soul is woven through this whole fucking realm and I couldn’t not take yours. Do you have any idea what that would do to me? To Sovngarde?" He cocks his head to the side. “Actually, what would that do to Sovngarde? The whole plane might just unravel. Hmmm, actually that might not be a bad backup plan, since it would probably destroy Alduin too... I’ll think about it.” Tiber turns to Dave and Dirk. "But you! I can’t believe you came here with four close-range combatants and no healer, by the way. Come on, guys. You're the ones who always talked about squad composition."

"We knew we'd have you," Dave says shrugging.

"Sure, leave all the restoration to Ty. Just because I can keep ten guys in top shape for an hour doesn't mean I like to."

Dave laughs. "Yanno, Ty? I've missed you."

The god smiles softly, shakes his head, and chuckles. "I missed you too. Man, we should totally just hang out after this. We'll send the kids to bed and reminisce about old times. Like I said, got some folks who would be dying to see you if they weren’t already ghosts."

"What about Jake and Jade?" John asks.

"Who? Oh, you guys find new partners? Oh my gods you need to give me details!" The bubbly excitement in his voice is a sharp turn from the sternness he’d shown John just a moment ago.

"Are you actually okay?" You whisper to John as Dave and Dirk fill him in.

He nods. "Honestly, better than I have been since we started getting close to the portal." He looks like it too. His eyes are shining blue again and his expressions and movements seem more powerful, less controlled and forced.

"John, how long were you hurting?" You ask.

"I know I should have said something earlier. I… I didn't realize there was anything that we could do. I thought we would just do this and get out before I unraveled completely. And it got a million times worse after we actually jumped through the portal."

Part of you wants to snap at him. If he'd have said something earlier, you could have done something about it! But, really, what could you have done? You didn’t bring any magicka poisons, so just about anything you gave him would have done nothing or made it worse. You'd have just panicked, maybe wanted to turn back. Even if you didn't you'd be distracted the whole time, always worrying about him, focusing more on him than taking care of yourself.

"John?"

"Yeah?"

"I’m just glad you're feeling better."

He laughs softly. “Yeah, me too.”
Okay," Tiber says, "That's enough for now. Don't worry, you three; I'll get them home eventually and Dave can time travel back to whenever, right?"

"Right." Dave confirms.

"Then let's go."

"Should we- Aren't we going to ask some of these guys for help?" you ask, gesturing back towards the souls gathered around the tables.

The emperor shakes his head. "Alduin can take an exposed soul in an instant. The fog kept his eyes off of everyone while they made their way here, made it so we sustained fewer casualties, but he already picked off too many of my people. But your bodies should keep you safe, and if he wants me and Aggie he'll have to beat us first."

"We could have really used the backup," you grumble. "But okay."

"Everyone ready," he asks, eyes sweeping over everyone before they finally fixate on John.

The Striders nod and draw their swords. Aradia lets out an excited giggle before verbally confirming. You wait. It's not until after John smiles and lets out a brief "yep!" that you agree.

"Good, let's go."

Tiber and Agnorith vanish, and in their place another figure appears. He stands about ten feet tall, wearing armor that looks like it's made of dragon scales. Talos rolls his shoulders and steps outside. The rest of you follow in his wake.

The doors slam shut behind you with bone-shaking finality and your heart starts to race. You take a few deep breaths, steadying yourself. The energy is good, but you can't panic. Panic makes you stupid and stupid will actually get you killed.

You wish you didn't have time to think, but you do. Talos marches you across the bridge. It should feel like towards victory or valor, and maybe if you were raised to be a Nord you'd get that sense. Instead you get more of a "sheep to the slaughter" kind of vibe.

You reach for John's hand and he holds you tightly. You know he's as scared as you are, but he feels steady, controlled. You do your best to channel that.

When you reach the end of the bridge you see Tsun waiting for you, axe in his hands.

"Is it time?" He asks.

"It is," Talos says. He has a strange double voice, like both men speaking at once. "But this is not your fight. Go inside."

"Lord Talos, I-"

Talos looks down at him sternly. "Your job is to protect the Hall and its dead. You cannot do that if you yourself are consumed."

"...Fine." Tsun turns and marches away from the flight.

"Get ready," The god says.

Dave flashsteps to the opposite side of the clearing in front of the hall and gives you a thumbs up.
Aradia returns the gesture. You ready your bow and coat an arrow with the strongest poison you have. John summons his armor and hammer. They both immediately start letting out trails of black smoke, but they seem to be steady enough for the moment. Talos nods and lifts his hand.

The fog that had filled the valley disappears without a trace. You see forests, castles, villages, but your eyes are drawn to a mountain in the distance. Lord English has his long snake-like body wrapped around the very summit. He spreads his wings and flies towards you.

But Dave and Aradia are ready. As soon as English clears the trees a wall of red light goes up, encircling the area.

"What is this?" the dragon hisses.

You and John both shoot at the same time. Before your arrow or his fireball can make contact, John follows it up with a shout. English plummets to the ground and draws himself up to strike. John starts to move, but Talos grabs him.

"Oh no you don't! I told you, you're not allowed to get killed!"

You're not sure if he keeps talking or not, because the blue glow around Lord English is starting to fade and you and Dirk need to get in there.

Apparently the conversation is over before you get too close, because John shouts again, keeping the beast down. The dragon lets out a shout of his own and fireballs start falling from the sky, just like they did back in Helgen, and then Lord English tries to stop your charge by shooting lightning at you and Dirk. When you dodge out of the way he tries to strike like a snake. You see blood out of the corner of your eye and Dirk screams as his arm is caught in the dragon's jaws.

You cut around and get on Lord English's neck. Hopefully the old sickle-in-the-eye trick will still work. You shove your blades in as far as they'll go. Lord English throws his head back and lets out a pained roar. The blades slide out and you're flung backwards, landing hard on your shoulder. Thankfully, this armor does its job and even though it still hurts when you make connection with the big magic wall, you can get back on your feet. You feel the warm rush of magic and you can tell you're not even going to bruise. Dirk's entire side glows, and it looks like he's okay. Somehow.

John shouts again, keeping Lord English down, but the dragon retaliates with a wall of multi-colored lightning. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shitshitshit. You sprint forward and dig your sickle into English's wing. He gasps and turns toward you. But John's okay. Talos has a ward the size of a house in front of the two of them. And you're able to avoid English by moving a few steps to the left and then taking advantage of his new position to dig your sickles into one of his earholes. More blood starts pouring out and Dirk runs along the Dragon's side, cutting through the scales with his sword.

"Karkat! Watch out!" John calls.

You look up and there's a flaming rock heading right towards you. Oh fuck.

For a moment, your world is just burning, weight and pain. Then it starts to cool, starts to darken. There's some noise, but that's all it is, really. Just noise.

Something around you is soft. It's nice. Maybe you can just… just…

The weight comes off of you, and then a moment later, the pain goes away completely. You open your eyes. Golden sparks still race across your skin and John has you in his arms. It feels nice, but why does he look so scared? And why is it so noisy?
You turn your head a little, and oh yeah, Alduin and Talos are fighting. That's what you were doing. Your heart starts beating faster. You're supposed to be in there, supposed to be helping… But, actually, it looks like Dirk and Talos are doing pretty well together. The god holds the dragon back while Dirk shoots purple lightning at him. Well that's a new one.

John sets you down gently and then launches a few more ice spikes at the dragon, throwing in a shout for good measure. You shakily get to your feet and pull out your bow. You tip your best arrow with a paralysis poison, draw, and fire. You hit it in the side, but it barely seems to care. Then the poison takes hold and the beast freezes. With a harsh grunt, Dirk pulls his arms back. For a moment you see two dragons. There's one solid version, still slumped over, and another translucent one wrapped in Dirk's lightning and thrashing wildly.

"Now!" Dirk shouts, "Hit the soul!"

John takes a deep breath and hits Lord English with a concentrated blast of chaos magic. The soul ripples, twists, and then breaks into pieces. Wisps of red light dissipate up towards the shining sky. Dave and Aradia let the barrier down and you all stagger back

"Was that it?" You ask. "Did we do it?"

The body starts to smoke, light peeks out from between his scales. John steps in front of you and puts up a ward. You watch through the defense as the light bursts forward out of the monster. Chunks of scales and bone go flying.

John lets the ward down and then kneels down to pick up a claw. "Now I think we did." He inspects the thing for a minute, and then slides it into one of his pouches.

"Jonathan Egbert, you are not taking that piece of garbage with you."

"Come on, can't I have a memento from the time we saved the world?"

"John, it's a claw."

"But it's Alduin's claw."

"Hey," Tiber – and it is back to just being Tiber, you have no idea where Agnorith went – leans against the skull. "Come on, kid, go big or go home."

"Okay, I take it back, you can have the claw," you say.

"But Karkat think of how cool this would look if we mounted it!"

"It would never fit in our house!"

"I could take it back to Battlehorn."

You sputter. "You wanna haul that thing two hundred miles and over a mountain range?"

John looks at the skull, looks back to you and frowns. "I guess not…"

"Mine then," Tiber says, levitating the skull.

Agnorith reappears in front of him. "Ty, no."

"But we're right here! And there's totally room over the window!"
They stare at each other, an obvious battle of wills. Agnorith crumbles first. "Okay, fine. But I'm not spending the next week on my hands and knees scrounging for scales so you can turn them into a dress or something."

Tiber gasps, his face lighting up. "Oh, Aggie! That's such a great idea! He was so shiny, think of how pretty I'd look!"

Dave comes over and elbows you gently. "You guys might wanna get a move on before Ty starts giving John ideas."

John's not really paying attention, more poking around the bits of carcass for other things he can carry. But still, you know by how he picks up more than he lets on, both metaphorically and literally. He's probably got enough bits stuffed in various pockets to build a decent-sized model.

You kneel down and grab your sickles from the ground. "Hey, moron, remember the part where you're slowly dying? Let's get you back to Nirn."

He sighs. "Yeah, alright. I've probably got enough."

Dave and Dirk wave you a lazy goodbye and you turn your backs on them and the bickering gods, headed back along the path.

"You know?" Aradia says after a minute or so. "It's almost sad."

"A little," John replies. "I mean, we've been worried about this whole dragon thing for so long, now it's like where do we go from here? And, if this was our real purpose what do we do now?"

You smile at him. "I mean, we do have that other list of quests. I think Dawnstar might still be having its nightmare problem for starters..."

"Oh?" He raises an eyebrow at you. "Is that so, mister I just want to get a house and be done adventuring?"

You groan. "Fucking Azura, you're going to keep going on about this for the rest of our lives, aren't you?"

"Aw, Karkat, don't be silly. We'll get the soul bond going and then I'll keep going on about it for the rest of eternity!"

Aradia lets out a thoughtful sound. "Well, I suppose that part too. But I meant that I would have liked to see what happens when you mix a Divine and daedric soul. I mean, Tiber Septim said the whole realm might unravel. That would have really been something!"

"Yeah," John says. "Let's not do that. It's bad enough trying to mix two different types of daedra."

"Oooh, what happens?"

"Right! You weren't here for this story! So it started because there was this other Dragonborn who was working for Hermaeus Mora, so Apocrypha, and I've got ties to the Shivering Isles so-"

John has a huge smile on his face as he tells Aradia about the fight with Miraak, and gets even more excited when she understands some of the details about getting Miraak to work with him that are way over your head. Yet you feel like you could watch him forever. He's starting to flag again, probably as the thrill of the battle and the drain magicka spell wears off, but he's still so animated. You love it.
And this, you realize, is the answer to John's question. This is what you're going to do. You're going to keep on living, whatever that means at the time. Because you kind of get the feeling that, between the two of you, you'll be coming across enough trouble to keep you busy for at least three lifetimes. You are absolutely looking forward to it.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter took a little longer to get out. Some of you who follow me on tumblr probably know I've been feeling a little uninspired lately, and this chapter actually needed more TLC than I thought. (I cut like 4 pages of various little scenes or threads that didn't add much to the story)

I'm not sure how long it'll take me to get the epilogue out. I've been working on it in bits and spurts. But this is the end of the original story. I really, really hope you like it and if you did please remember to leave a comment! It really helps a lot and will go a long way in helping me stay motivated.
Epilogue

Chapter by teaandcharcoal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even as a person from Windhelm you have to admit that there’s something nice about the consistency of the Imperial roads. If it weren’t for the guard post and the old, crumbling wall you would have never known you were entering Cyrodiil. As the climate became drier and the trees became sparser, the Imperial road carried on and on, ever undeterred and unchanging. Only the color of the milestones served to differentiate the counties from one another.

As you head Northwest from Chorrol you notice hills becoming more and more common. They create endless waves of wheat, shimmering gold in the Last Seed sun. The fields are more neatly divided than you’d see in Skyrim, with rows of grapevines separating them. Sheep and goats roam across long stretches of fallow land, though you have no idea how they get the energy in this heat. John keeps shoving water skins at you whenever you say you're hot, but the lukewarm water provides very limited relief. At least you got a second horse before you left. The idea was that you’d be able to take more stuff back with you, but right now it’s just nice that the two of you aren’t stuck pressed together, making you even more sweaty and gross. As the hills get steeper and more intense you begin to see fewer and fewer of the carefully manicured fields. They’re still present, of course, but smaller and less numerous. Much of the ground seems covered by scrub and short, stubby grass.

“Yeah, this area’s been kind of abandoned as long as I can remember,” John says when you ask him about it. “Dad says there used to be more farmers, but a lot of the families were wiped out or moved away during the war. There’s still a few, but if people have a choice they want land nearer to a town. Easier to sell stuff, you know? And this is about as far in the middle of nowhere as you can get. The border’s just up there.”

The road curves, taking you between two massive rocky hills. In the shadow of the more western hill you see a large wooden sign. The word “Battlehorn” has been carved into it in big block letters and beneath it is John’s family’s crest, an only slightly altered version of Sheogorath’s symbol (you honestly don’t know how they got away with that, but you get the feeling that the Egberts’ connection to Daedra may be the worst kept secret in Tamriel’s political history).

“So, uh, welcome home I guess?” he says, smiling nervously at you.

You nod back, not forcing yourself to return the smile. He wouldn’t buy it anyway. After a year he knows you way to well. Instead you look back to the road stretching out in front of you. It gets steeper and rockier ahead, but if you squint you think you can see more and more farms. Or maybe they’re just weird rocks. It’s not until you start getting closer that you realize the lumps are cottages, even if most of their inhabitants are nowhere to be found. As you peek through windows you notice most of the buildings have people sleeping inside, hiding from the worst of the afternoon heat. You try not to feel relieved that he was right about there being more people out here. The road turns again, and from here you can see the castle faintly in the distance on your right. A bit nearer and on your left there’s a swell of greenery. It looks as though there might actually be trees.

“What the hell?” you demand.
“Huh?” He follows your gaze. “Oh! That’s just the lake. Most of that’s just olives and stuff. There’s a little tiny forest around the southern part, though, and it’s got some deer and stuff in it. Kinda wild, though, right? It’s like grass, grass, grass, grass, grass, woods! I think that’s why they built the castle where they did, though.”

It takes you about an hour to get the rest of the way to town. The population gets denser as you go on and the fields become more uniform again. A few people come up to you. John smiles broadly and greets most of them by name, but tells them you need to keep moving. You just kind of sit there on your horse and try to look friendly. Thank Akatosh he’s holding back on the chatting.

The town is built around a fork in the road. The left path continues northwest, presumably towards Hammerfell, but the right goes up towards the castle. There’s not much of a street layout. Buildings appear to be clustered around the main road, with dirt paths connecting them. All of the buildings are made of either stone or clay, not a single timber structure to be seen other than a few lean-tos for chickens. You notice signs for an inn, a general trader, baker, and what you’re guessing is a bathhouse. The town is somewhere between the size that Riverwood is and Helgen used to be.

A man sweeps the porch in front of the inn. When he looks up and sees you he drops the broom and throws open the door.

“Sir John is back!” He yells inside.

“Oh boy,” John says, sliding off of Shadowmere. “We should get these horses to the stables before-“

He doesn’t get the chance to finish his sentence because people come pouring out of the buildings. It seems like everyone in town comes out to greet you. Several dozen people gather around the two of you. As you scan the crowd you see a whole lot of Imperials, Redguards and people who are ambiguous enough to be either. There’s a couple of humans who you think are Bretons, but could also be paler Imperials or more compact Nords. You don’t see a single elf. They all clamor for John’s attention.

“You’re finally back!”

“Did you really put down the rebellion by yourself?”

“It’s been so dull around here with you gone!”

“It’s good to see you’re alright! Lord Egbert said you were fine, but a lot of us were worried…”

“How big are dragons?”

“Verunio says he heard the grown-ups saying you killed a giant with its own club. Is he a liar?”

“I’m not a liar, Frutira!”

“Okay, that’s enough!” a boy, maybe fifteen or sixteen, runs forward. He wears something kind of like the city guard in Chorrol had, but his tunic is black with the Egbert’s crest embroidered on the left side of his chest. He forces his way through the crowd and gets in front of John. He’s so much smaller and softer-looking it’s almost comical. “Leave them be! All travelers are promised protection by the-“

“Oh!” John says, “Are you a new apprentice?”

The boy startles and looks back at the two of you. His eyes settle on John’s face and he jumps
again. “I-I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t realize-“

John laughs. “It’s fine. This your first day of guard duty? I don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

“Second. Sir Jake said- He told me there probably wouldn’t be any trouble, but I was kind of hoping...” He looks almost put out that the townsfolk turned out not to be an angry mob.

John laughs. “Don’t worry, I’m sure they’ll find a wolf pack or a bandit group or something soon enough. What’s your name?”

“Crulin Macconius,” he says timidly.

“Okay, Crulin, can you do me a favor?”

“Whatever you want, sir!”

John hands him Shadowmere’s reins. “Take our horses to the stable and give them to Salas. Tell him they’re mine and I’m sorry I lost Blossom. And it would be great if they could bring our stuff up to the castle, but if they can’t we’ll send someone with a cart once it cools off a little.”

The boy nods and the crowd parts enough to allow him to lead the horses to the far side of town.

"Um, excuse me." You hear a small voice from beside you. You look down and there's a little kid standing next to you. They're little more than a toddler, and you're too ignorant to the styles around here to know their gender. "Are you okay, mister?"

"Uh? I think so?" You say, raising an eyebrow.

"Are you sure?" they ask. "Your skin's all grey."

"Rumma!" A woman standing next to her, presumably their mother, snaps. "You can't just ask-"

"I... uh..." your gaze flicks up to the woman. "It's okay. You guys don't get a lot of Dunmer around here, do you?"

"No, sir, we don't." She says timidly.

"Huh..." You kneel down next to the kid. "Yeah, some people are just like this."

"Your eyes are red too! Are you a vampire? But it's daytime!"

"No, I'm a- you'd probably call us dark elves around here."

"So kinda like Gitmel?" she asks.

You look over at John. “Gitmel’s one of the older apprentices. She’s-”

"Yeah!" Rumma says, cutting him off. "She's a 'prentice! She makes magic glass butterflies for us!"

"Sweetie," the mother says, also getting down on her child's level. "Gitmel's a wood elf. They're both elves, but they're different. Kind of like how Imperials and Redguards are both humans but we're different."

Rumma frowns for a moment, deeply considering the proposition. "Okay, thanks. Bye, mister!"
Then they turn away and wander off. Their mother follows, clearly exasperated.

"Sorry," John says. He's blushing hard and not making eye contact.

"About what?" you ask, straightening back up.

"A lot of these people… they haven't traveled and they're not going to. We're a little less insular than some of the places way off in the middle of nowhere, but it's still mostly Redguards and Imperial traders going back and forth. Like, it's super fun and exciting when a Khajiit caravan comes to town. But... um... we should probably go. If Dad finds out we were loitering in town too long he's not gonna be happy."

You look around uncertainly. "Why's that?"

He snorts. "Not anything big, he just really wants to meet you!"

John takes you by the hand and drags you down the path to the right. The hill is ridiculously steep, which is probably why they slapped a castle down on top of it. There's a road that winds around the hill, but you march straight up a little dirt path that's been formed in the short grass.

The gate is wide open. A young Bosmer sits perched on a stool placed carefully in the castle's shadow. John waves as he approaches and she smiles back at you.

“Hey,” he says, “How’s it going?”

She sighs. “Dull, as usual. Vaguely keeping an eye on the boy in town and waiting for my watch to end so I can get back to real training. How was Skyrim?” She smirks, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Other than apparently a good source of suitors?”

“Oh right! Gitmel, this is Karkat. We started off traveling together after Helgen, and then, yeah, feelings happened. Karkat this is Gitmel, she’s three years younger than me? Four?”

“Two, actually.”

“Wait, really?”

“I was four years behind you, since you started so early."

“Oh yeah! So that means you’re almost done, right?”

She nods. “Hence why I’ve been put on babysitting duty.”

“Well, we should let you get back to that. Any idea where dad is?”

“I can’t be certain, but since Jake’s taken over most of the training Lord Egbert has spent more and more time in the sitting room, helping and-or annoying Sir Joel.”

“Cool, thanks!” He drags you off again before you can say a word to Gitmel. She just laughs and waves you a brief goodbye.

Past the gates you enter an open courtyard. There are a few more clay buildings inside. Most are unmarked, but you catch sight of a forge. A few wooden lean-tos with chicken nests inside have been placed in the shadows of the walls. The center of the courtyard is filled with several training dummies, and targets. One structure looks like a stable, but it’s completely empty. Jake walks back and forth behind another pair of apprentices, who are launching fireballs at a stone target. The firm, serious look on his face melts as he glances over to wave at you. But he only gives you that
moment before turning back to watch the apprentices’ technique. John doesn’t even try to stop and talk to him, instead leading you through the large wooden door of the castle itself.

It’s significantly cooler inside, almost like entering a cave. Most of the candles haven’t been lit and the thin slit-like windows don’t allow much light inside, so it takes your eyes a moment to adjust. There’s a large balcony in front of you with wide staircases leading up to it on either side of the hall.

“Okay,” John says, “So this is the foyer, but we don’t really use it except for like festivals or other times the town needs a speech. The main hall is just past it.” You head through an arched opening on the left and enter a hallways stretching out to the left and right. There’s another arch ahead of you, and past that you see a wide open space. There’s a small dais with a short table and two chairs at the far end of the room. In front of that you see a much longer table, with space for maybe thirty people. For the moment, however, it’s bare, the benches tucked neatly beneath it.

“So, hall for hall needs. This is where dinner and sometimes lunch happens, and where people come on grievance days. If you go left you’ll find a door to the right that leads down to the basement. That’s where the kitchen and servants’ quarters are, but I’ll show you around later because it’s kind of a maze and I’ll have to introduce you to the Pontilias. I’ve told you about them, right?”

You wrack your brain. “Oh! They’re the family of servants, right?”

“Right. If you want bonus points, remember that they’ve been here longer than my family has. They love that and life is a lot easier when they like you. Anyway, if you turn left instead of going to the basement you wind up in the barracks where the apprentices stay. Now further into the hall and to the left there’s another door and that leads to some stairs that’ll take you up to Dad’s rooms, but you probably won’t need to worry about that. Any questions so far?”

“Uh…” Your mind is reeling from the brevity of the tour and the overflow of information, but you do your best to soak it all in. John looks at you expectantly. “I’ll figure it out.”

He gives you a sympathetic smile. “It’s okay. Most of this stuff you don’t need to know right away. There’ll be plenty of time to show you around more later, and I’m sure anyone’ll be happy to help you out. Besides, you’ll probably be spending most of your time over here.” He turns and walks to the right. “This is the way to the East Wing. There’s a nice sitting room kind of like we had back at our house and then through the hallway there’s the four bedrooms that me and my cousins slept in.” He opens the door and leads you through.

The room looks relatively comfortable. There’s a small fire crackling in the fireplace and two large hounds lay curl on the floor in front of it. Between that and the wall sconces, you can actually see relatively well in here. There are several large bookcases against the walls, filled with ancient tomes and several bizarre artifacts. A pair of plush armchairs sit beside the fire, both of them empty. Two men sit at a round table big enough for perhaps five or six people. Their backs are to you, looking down at a piece of parchment.

“Hi dad! Hi uncle Joel!” John cries out.

They both startle, then the one on the right stands, beaming brightly at the two of you. He looks significantly older than you were expecting, his back bent and face heavily lined, but then again humans always age faster than you’d expect. You can still see something of John in him – though you suppose it really should be the other way around. It’s the clearest in the ears of all places, since his nose droops slightly with age, but you can see a little bit of the same frame under the looser skin. He wears a cream-colored shirt and darker trousers with a matching dark hat. The dogs go
absolutely wild, jumping to their feet and bounding over. They bark excitedly and go up on their hind legs, sniffing and licking whatever of John they can reach, which happens to be almost all of them.

John laughs. He scratches and pets them as well as he can with the things jumping all over him. “And it’s good to see you guys too! Yes it is!” The dogs bark excitedly and wag their tails.

“Aeolus, Enyo, Down.” John’s father’s voice is authoritative and booming, far more than you were expecting. The dogs immediately get back onto all fours and stop barking, but that doesn’t stop them from sniffing excitedly at you and John.

“See?” John says, “They’re good dogs, Karkat. I told you.”

You’d roll your eyes at him, but you’re admittedly both concerned about the bear-sized creatures stalking around and sniffing almost at your crotch and the two men you absolutely know are judging you, even if they’re admittedly much more focused on John at the moment. John’s father embraces his son tightly before pulling away to give him a little kiss on his forehead.

"Welcome home," he says, his voice much softer this time.

"Thanks, dad." John replies.

"Now now," the other man says. "You’re not going to make an old man push himself up just to greet his nephew, hmm?"

"Of course not!" John bends down to give him a hug. "I missed you too."

John's father approaches you. "And you must be Karkat."

"I-" the vowel comes out wrong, far brighter than it's supposed to be. Dammit, you’ve practiced this a thousand times and you still fuck up. "Yes, I am."

He gives you a soft smile. "Not bad, Karkat. But you needn't be so formal with us. At least, not in this capacity. I know there are a lot of… intricacies to proper etiquette, but you'll have time to learn. No one here will judge you. We want you to feel welcome."

"Thanks," you say, though you still try to do it properly.

You shift your weight from one foot to the other, uncertain of what to do. This could all still be a test. You glance over to John, hoping he'll give you some sort of signal. He looks happy enough, but he’s distracted by the dogs, murmuring nonsense to them and leaving you out in the cold. Fuck, shit, fuck, fuck, fuck.

Thankfully, his dad actually gives you a bit of help. "Oh, of course. You must be tired, riding all the way from Chorrol in this heat. I ought to give you a chance to settle in before asking too much of you."

"Cool," John says, giving one of the dogs one last pet. “We'll leave you two to your business-y stuff. Anyway, Karkat, so my room is right down this hallway-"

But his father cuts him off. "Actually, John," he says. "I'd been meaning to talk to you about that."

"Huh?"

"Well, after you left I decided I thought I'd try giving my poor knees a rest, so I borrowed your
room for a few nights. I found that it helped considerably in keeping the arthritis under control, so I had my things moved down."

"Oh. So did I get bumped down a slot?"

"No. I just gave you the lord's chambers a bit early."

John balks at him. "Wait, really?"

"Why not? You'll be moving up there eventually. In the meantime, you're young; you can run stairs all day."

His face breaks into a huge grin. "Oh my gosh, Dad, thanks! Come on, Karkat, let's go!" He takes you by the hand again and leads you out the way you came.

This time when you enter the hallway he turns right, leading you into the great hall. Your footsteps echo loudly in the cavernous space.

"Are the lord's chambers really that special?" you ask.

He pauses. "Well, I mean, the heir apparent gets a pretty nice one too, but there's a couple perks."

"Like?" You ask.

"Privacy, for one," he mutters. "But it's also a little nicer. I think. To be honest I haven't been in either of the bedrooms up there. It's more like… donno, it's kind of stupid."

"John, whatever you say cannot possibly be as stupid as the reason I will come up with if you don't tell me."

"Heh, maybe later. It's kind of hard to describe."

This time you do roll your eyes. You'll get your answer out of him eventually.

The door he takes you through next opens to a tight staircase, winding up and up and up. Yeah, okay, you can see why someone in his seventies wouldn't want to deal with this at least once a day. But eventually you reach the top. John pauses for a moment in front of the old wooden door. He takes a deep breath and pushes it open.

From what you can see behind him, it's more than just 'pretty nice.' The walls are the same drab stone, but they have huge, gorgeous tapestries covering them. It's dark inside, but you can see some lovely dark wood furniture, carved with great flourish and attention to detail. John lights the intricate iron sconces with a flick of his wrist and then steps to the side, letting you into the room.

Across from the door is a fireplace almost big enough for you to stand in with two soft-looking chairs in front of it. On one side you see a huge desk, flanked by mostly-empty bookcases. On the other is a small dining table with three chairs, carefully placed in front of one of the slit windows. This room itself is almost as big as the first floor of your house in Whiterun.

"Holy shit," you murmur.

"You like it?" John asks.

"Yeah."

When you look back at him he's beaming at you. "I'm glad. So you've probably figured out that this is the main living area. It's kind of subdivided up already, but if you really wanted we could
probably consolidate the shelves and set up an alchemy table there,” he gestures to the lefthand bookshelf. “And that way we won’t have to drag the rest of the books back up here. But there’s tons of room downstairs for one and I’m not entirely sure how much time we’re gonna wind up spending up here. But, um,” he smiles bashfully. “If you ever want to do like a honeymoon or retreat kind of thing, we could always get one of the Pontilias to bring food and stuff and no one would have to see us for days…”

“Is that something you want?”

“Not right away! I mean, I’ve missed everyone a whole lot! But maybe after that I wouldn’t mind.” He takes a step towards you, giving you a little bit of bedroom eyes.

You swallow. “Yeah... Yeah I think I might like that.”

He closes the gap and kisses you, slow and sweet and romantic. Your eyelids flutter closed and you sigh into his lips. You try to deepen it, but then John pulls away.

“More later,” he says.

“You’re such a dick!”

“Hehe, I can’t help it if you’re cute when you’re riled up!”

You most certainly do not pout, but your little frown makes John laugh again. Such a dick. But when he takes your hand again you can’t help but forgive him.

“Besides, neither of us have even seen the bedroom yet.”

“Oh. So are we-“

“Not right now. But I wanna make sure we don’t walk into any furniture or something tonight.”

“Okay, yeah, probably a good idea,” you concede.

“Thought so.”

There’s one door on either side of the fireplace.

“Oh, that’s where those went.” John says. “So one of these is the designed to be the consort room, and I can’t remember which one, but it’s probably not that interesting.” He tries the door on the left. On the other side is a chamber about the size of your room at home. You see several pieces of furniture matching the ones in the front room, including a bed and a wardrobe (you think. Both of them have sheets over the top, but you can see the feet). There are also just some crates and barrels and chests. You see a couple racks of swords pressed up against the walls. Several cobwebs hang in front of each window.

“Huh, that’s where those went.” John says. “Sorry, man, it’s kind of more of a mess than I thought it’d be. Guess that’s what happens when no one uses a room properly for fifty-some years.”

“It’s fine,” you say. “We’ll have plenty of time to straighten it up later, right?”

“Right.” He smiles back at you with obvious relief. “So let’s not try to wade through that crap now!” he closes the door again and goes to the other one.

This is it. You get the same sense of foreboding as you did walking up to the castle doors, even though you know this is just an empty room. Still, it feels as though it takes an eternity for John to
open the door.

Part of you was expecting it to be ridiculously extravagant, almost as thought it was designed to make you feel uncomfortable with a flagrant display of money. Part of you was expecting it to be a letdown, dusty as the consort’s chamber with the nicer furniture removed for John’s father to continue using downstairs. Instead it feels like a natural continuation of the sitting room. The wardrobes are carved like the desk, the bed like the table, and all from the same dark wood. There are more tapestries on the walls. They don’t make immediate sense to you, so you figure they have to be some local myths or legends. Against one wall you see a wide washbasin stand and mounted to it is the biggest, clearest mirror you’ve ever seen, and though that comes close to the extravagance scenario, the way it blends into everything else so naturally makes it feel less ostentatious than it should. Thick, velvet curtains have been closed around the bed. When you peek behind them you see thick, fluffy pillows and black blankets embroidered with gold thread. You run your fingers across it: soft and smooth and, fuck, this is yours.

You hadn’t processed it on the way in, hadn’t processed it anywhere else in the castle, hadn’t even processed it in the main room. Of course, that only makes sense. Part of you still refused to believe that John actually wanted to marry you, even after almost four months of being betrothed. But the moment your fingertips touched the blanket something clicked. This wasn’t John showing you off. This wasn’t even just about taking you here to meet his family. This was the fulfillment of the promise he made to you back in Whiterun, this was giving you the rest of the gift you even now can scarcely comprehend, bigger than the house by orders upon orders of magnitude. Because now you’re not just a property owner, you’re honest-to-divines nobility now.

You walk in a daze towards the tiny window to peer through the small opening at the town below. Everything, everything out there is going to be yours too. What the ever-loving fuck? You feel like a mouse that’s been made the emperor and you have no idea what the fuck to do now.

So you turn back to John. He’s still back near the door, wringing his hands with an uneasy smile on his face that doesn’t mask the wide look of fear in his eyes. You look back out the window. Did you miss something? Some monster or demon or...? The sky is still clear, the sun shining bright down on the village that has gone back to what you assume is its normal routine.

“So, uh, what do you think?” He asks, voice wavering.

It’s you. He’s afraid of you, what you think, what you’ll say. You gape at him in disbelief.

“Shit, Karkat,” he says, staring down at the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. This is- fuck John, this is amazing.”

His eyes go wide.

“What? Did I say something wrong?”

He beams from ear to ear. "No! I just- Fuck I was so worried whether or not you'd like it!"

You sigh and rub your forehead. “John, think for just a second. Let’s pretend that your dad didn’t like me, that Jake and I weren’t kind of already friends, and you didn’t have a castle that would make like half of the Jarls jealous. Did you really think that you'd get me here and I'd say ‘no, never mind. I know I made all those undying declarations of love and devotion but I'd rather live alone in a town where I'm actively ridiculed and Dunmer are actively oppressed than one where I'm a little bit of a novelty but generally pretty respected and also get a husband who is super hot and loving and put me in a position of power and wealth?’"
"I know!" he rubs his eyes. "But… I wanted you to be comfortable. I love you so fucking much and so important that you're happy. Like, if you got here and you hated it we'd have to call everything off. And then with Dad giving us this room it's like… It just kind of hit me that this is real. That I got to come home perfectly fine from a big awesome adventure with a smart, sexy fiancé and that all this—" he briefly gestures around the room. "—could be the rest of my life. So the thought of having that all ripped away at the last second. I—I thought it would probably be okay, but I was just so worried." You actually think you see a couple of tears in his eye. He wipes at his face with the back of his hand.

You gently cup his face in your hands. "John, you're a huge dork."

He smiles weakly. "I know. I just… I couldn’t shake off this idea – and I know it’s stupid you don’t have to tell me – that like you’d just kind of tolerate being here. And just this paranoia that you’d be waiting around waiting for me to die."

His words stab you straight through the heart. Like you could ever—like you would ever. "Hey," you say. You kiss his forehead and then murmur against his skin. "I don’t know which one of you fuckers in there is messing with my John, but if you don’t stop and let him be happy I will find some way to get in there and fucking end you."

John bursts out laughing. "Alright, that was really sweet and adorable on its own, but you just made Miraak get all huffy."

"Mmm-hmm." This time you kiss him on the lips.

He lets out a little appreciative moan and wraps his arms around you.

"I thought we weren’t doing anything." You say teasingly.

"Shhhhh," he replies. He kisses you again, slow and sweet. He honestly smells a little bit sweaty and a little bit like horse, but he’s warm and solid and he feels so fucking good pressed against you.

Without looking, you reach behind you and throw open the curtains. The two of you fall onto the bed, a tangle of limbs just focused on getting closer, getting more. The pillows and mattress are cloud soft beneath your head. When the two of you pull apart for a moment, John looks down at you with more love than would be physically possible for any other person on the planet. But, then again, he always was special, wasn’t he?

Yeah, you think you can get used to this.

Chapter End Notes

Well, guys, this is it. Shorter than a usual chapter, but I thought it would make the ending a little less abrupt and it felt right to have it be this length. If there are any other things you’d like to know that I didn’t cover, I will word of god up anything you want, since I am a maladaptive daydreamer and have the next thirty years or so planned out for this world.

I really, really hope you've enjoyed this story, and thank you so much to everyone who’s gotten this far, whether you've been reading this story for the nearly four years since I started, if you found it today, or even if you find it after I post this. I loved
working on this project, and I worked harder and longer on this than I have on anything with the possible exception of my degree. If you could, it would mean the world to me if you could leave a comment, and even more if you shared it with other people.

If not, well, thank you for reading anyway.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!